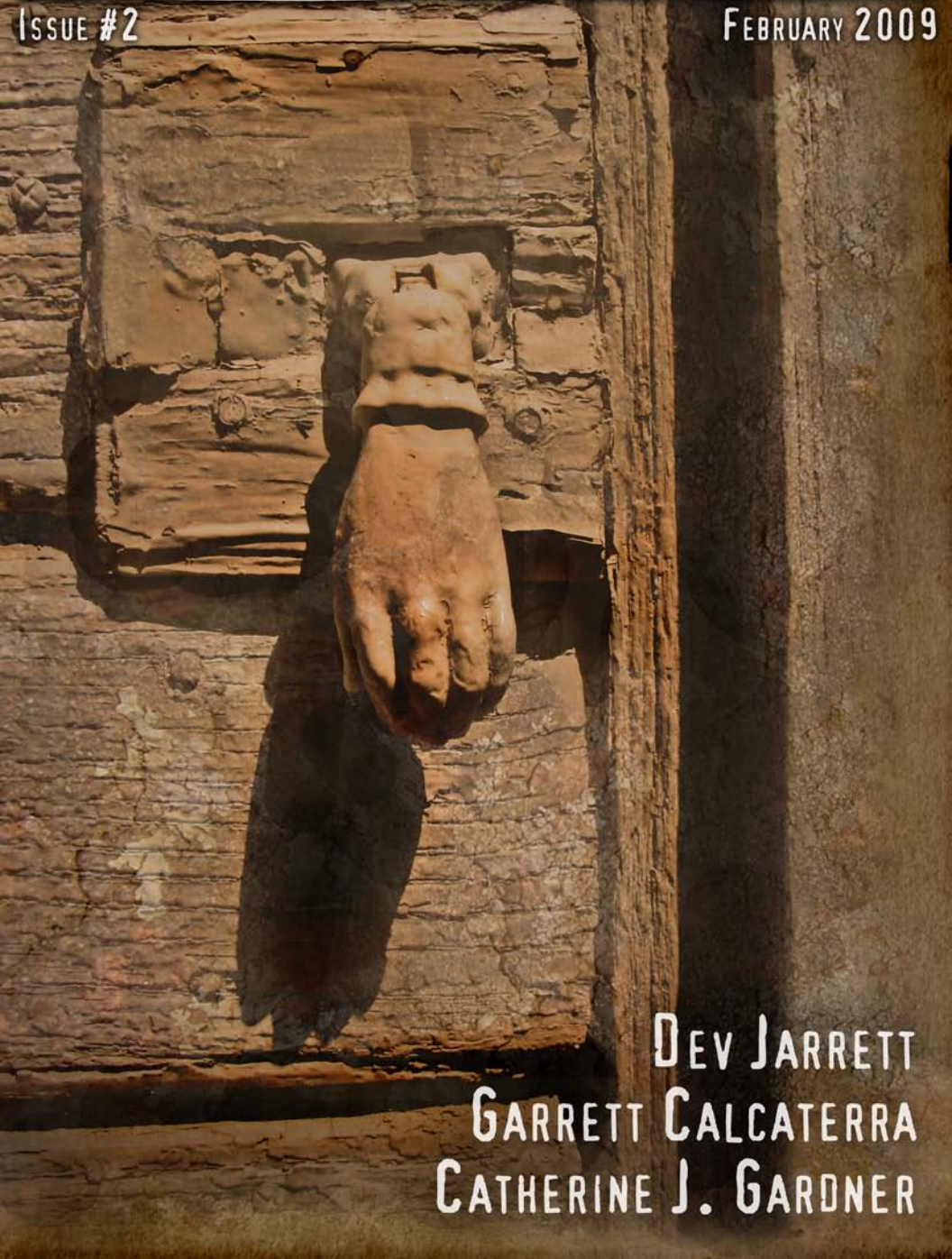


Arkham Tales

A MAGAZINE OF WEIRD FICTION

Issue #2

FEBRUARY 2009



DEV JARRETT
GARRETT CALCATERRA
CATHERINE J. GARDNER

OffWorld Designs

1-800-900-9056



For these and more great T-shirt designs
visit our website at offworlddesigns.com

Arkham Tales

A MAGAZINE OF WEIRD FICTION

Issue 2

February 2009

SHORT STORIES

- 4 Mi Morena K.S. Clay
- 10 What Friends Are For Dev Jarrett
- 18 The Night Guest Jason Hardy
- 22 Cthulhu's Nightmare Bric Barnes
- 27 Compositions in Gratitude and Sorrow Bret Tallman
- 30 A Curse in Any Language Matt Finucane
- 34 Uncle Eric's Leather Bound Tale Catherine J. Gardner
- 40 Some Nutcase John Jasper Owens
- 96 Weather Diane Payne

POETRY

- 43 Drown K.S. Conlon

NOVELLA

- 44 The Key Ring Garrett Calcaterra

DEPARTMENTS

- 2 Editorial: The Future Belongs to the Long Tail
- 99 Contributor Notes

Cover art for this issue, "Knocking on Heaven's Door," by Jean-Marc Velladier. All other artwork adapted from public domain sources.

Editor & Publisher Nathan Shumate
Editorial Board Crispin Burnham, Christopher B. Jackson

Arkham Tales is published four times a year by Cold Fusion Media Empire. All work contained herein is © 2009 Cold Fusion Media Empire or the respective author. This magazine is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License. Contributor guidelines and advertiser information available at <http://www.arkhamtales.com>. Address all editorial inquiries to arkhamtales@gmail.com.

EDITORIAL: THE FUTURE BELONGS TO THE LONG TAIL

Nathan Shumate

When I was a youngster in the late '70s and early '80s, dinosaurs roamed the Earth. We called them "networks." Our TV set only picked up two of them because we were in the hinterlands of eastern Canada; they were the same two which were in every household we knew. All the kids at school watched the same show every night (because what were the odds that two cool shows would be opposite each other?), and the rare youth who had to go to bed before one of the popular programs was left out of the cultural mainstream of his peers. Note: That was usually me.

That kind of monoculture doesn't exist anymore, on television or anywhere else. The programs in the TV Top Ten have only a fraction of the viewership they had a decade ago. Cinema attendance for the average film (outside of the one of two lynchpin blockbusters that dominate the summer season) is way down. Newspapers are downsizing all over the country, and the circulation for general-purpose magazines like Reader's Digest has dropped dramatically. Major music labels have tried for years to blame their lack of breakout hit artists on firesharing.

But people are still watching just as many TV shows and movies as they used to; people are reading more news and other entertainment content than ever before. And it isn't pirating of media that's hurting the multinational bottom lines, no matter what the RIAA wants you to believe. The 20th century was an era of the media monoculture; the 21st is an era of media diversification.

The "long tail" is a description of the statistical trail-off on either side of the swell of a bell curve. The bulk of the curve is what draws the eye, but it takes a long time for the marginal numbers on the sides to trail away to zero. Now, as the monoculture breaks up, the height of the curve isn't nearly as impressive, and the long tails trailing away become, in the aggregate, more significant.

What does this mean for media as an industry? For one thing, it

means that it can no longer function as "industry" classically does, with monolithic means of production and distribution. The democratization of media means that the quality gap between the high-end production and the cottage production is constantly shrinking, and if the subject matter of the cottage production fits the needs of a particular individual more closely than the mass-produced wares, the individual can happily and easily turn to the cottage production. In the old days, you couldn't easily find media that fit your particular preferences, and instead simply aligned your preferences to the few extant choices. Nowadays, you can rely on niche marketing to be glossy, professional, and as close as the nearest search engine.

Thanks to the thickening of the long tail, fewer companies will be able make a killing on entertainment and information media, but more individuals will be able to decent living. And even more individuals will be able to indulge in a self-supporting passion, a hobby which doesn't pay all of the bills but at least pays its way.

That's exactly where *Arkham Tales* is right now, hypothetically: a niche offering which isn't going to make anyone rich, but which could support itself among a cadre of like-minded fans who appreciate the tradition of weird fiction, updated from the pulp magazines to the modern era. Nobody's going to make a fortune off this; nobody's even going to make a living. But if the magazine breaks even, then I'll consider that a success.

In the meantime, the experiment continues, and this issue is an experiment within an experiment. The centerpiece of this issue is Garrett Calcaterra's "The Key Ring" which, at 21,000 words, is as long as anything we're ever going to publish. As a counterbalance (and to keep the contents page from appearing too bare), the remainder of the issue is filled with stories under 2,500 words. Let us know if that kind of balance works for you, and what you want to see more of in the coming issues. ●



MI MORENA

K.S. Clay

She came to John each night. In his dreams? He did not know. He knew every inch of her body, from the hair that was cut uneven yet shown like dark silk in the moonlight, to the shoes she wore on her small feet. Once they must have been beautiful. Now the toes were ragged, a flap hanging down from each. The soles he saw when she lifted up on those toes (no, it was when she lifted up on the wind) were spotted and worn. The shoes said she had been dancing for a long time. John placed a palm against the window sill. Not that he needed the shoes to tell him that. The expression on her face made that fact just as clear.

She was young. Her lips held the freshness of cherry blossoms; her skin, unflushed despite the exercise, made a pale and smooth canvas. There were only two things that might make him question this. One was her movements, the practiced sway and dip, the purpose and the perfection and yet with a certain carelessness that came every now and again. The other was her eyes. He'd only seen them once, when she twirled underneath a streetlight. Her lashes were long and dark and they rose just slightly. Her mouth was smiling. Her eyes were not. They were anticipatory and yet not hopeful. Wistful, he might say if the day was sunny. Mournful he might say if it was raining. Their color: It's funny but he didn't remember.

It rained now. He moved his fingers back and forth along the window sill. He wanted to call out to her. He wanted to sigh. He wanted to moan, to do something about this soreness, this ache that took over his body when he saw her. He wanted to ask why his mind went hazy, why she appeared to be bathed in a grayish blue fog. Instead he clasped the sill with his hands. The metal was hot, not cool against his palms.

It was seven more days before John removed those palms, before he stepped from the window while she was still dancing and began to move toward the apartment door. It was seven days before he took the risk and he almost found himself running back. An alarm in his head

cried out to stay. An alarm in his head told him she would go. She would leave. She would disappear from his life and he would never see her again. It felt heretical. Her dancing, her form in the moonlight had become a sacred sight, and to disturb that sight with base touch, something he knew he'd have trouble refraining from, would be wrong.

She was still there. Her being shimmered and swayed. Her foot kicked high behind her. She spun and she jumped. Surprisingly, there was no sound as her feet connected with the concrete. He stepped toward her slowly.

"Hello," he said.

For the first time in the week that he'd been watching her, the dark haired woman fell.

"Whoa," he said, and reached out to steady her. His fingers never connected. One minute she was falling and he had his hand behind her back. He had just enough time to register her expression as her face turned toward him and then she was gone, dissolved into the air. What he saw in that face, however, stayed. What he saw in that face made him watch the ground for shadows as he walked to work the next day, made him check behind the shower curtain before he unzipped himself in the bathroom. What he saw in that face was something he'd never seen before in his life: pure and absolute horror.

Her eyes widened until they looked as if they were going to pop. Her mouth parted to reveal blood where she'd bitten into her lip and her teeth were displayed so prominently they reminded him of skeletons. For the first time he'd heard her make a sound, a single gasp that in one moment revealed more than could have come from a dozen screams. He had wondered before, before he even went out, if she was a dream. She had seemed too perfect to be real. And now that was confirmed, because real people didn't disappear. She was a dream. The knowledge did not comfort him as he thought it would. She was a dream and yet that dream haunted him.

John closed the drapes across the window. He didn't approach it for days. A can of soda he'd set on the sill before going out to see her was still there when he did, ants gulping the last of the sticky sweet fluid. Which led to the question, if she was a dream and the soda was on the sill, did it mean he was sleepwalking? He picked up the can and headed for the kitchen, a line of ants marching across his knuckles. At the doorway he glanced back, and the hand holding the soda fell to his side. The drapes were open. On the other side of the glass the woman danced.

The window was cracked, cold air rushing through, and on the air came the sound of her pain. On the breeze came a sob. When he reached the window, approaching carefully lest she disappear as she had before, he noticed another new development, one that caused him to grip the sill in a new way. She wasn't wearing shoes. The ancient shoes with the ancient soles were gone. She danced barefoot beneath the streetlamp and the light, instead of bouncing off of her hair now bounced off of her feet and the blood that coated them.

He'd thought her feet were small and delicate. They were raw and red, and through the medium of blood becoming redder. He no longer wanted to go out to her. Despite the fairytales of prince charmings rushing to save their injured maidens, the sight of the blood made him step away and not forward. It made bile rise in his throat. Because she was still dancing. Even as her feet left bloody prints on the pavement (prints that mysteriously disappeared soon after she moved), she twirled and dipped.

When he finally did wrench his gaze up toward her face it was the sight of blood once again that greeted him. A tiny trail made its way from her mouth down to her chin, as if she were a vampire that forgot to clean herself off after her last meal. He didn't bother to look into her eyes. The magnetism of the night before was broken. All he could think of was the blood and the insane dancing.

It was a dream, John reminded himself when he woke in the morning. He reminded himself again as he twisted the faucet for the shower and felt the hot water hit his back, washing away the stench of sweat that coated his body. It was a horrible recurring dream.

He tried to distract himself by turning on the television. There was an Ecoli scare surrounding a local restaurant, and a nineteen year old woman had gone missing. He watched the stories in spurts. His mind kept returning to the dream.

He went to the library that day, calling in sick for work. He looked up dreams in the catalog and made his way to the unusually large section it referred him to.

Dictionaries of symbols that were supposed to appear in dreams, accounts of famous dreams that influenced history, dreams and rituals of the Native American Indians. It took him all afternoon to find what he was searching for. When he finally found what he was looking for it was one lonely chapter stuffed inside a larger tome. Titled "How to Excise a Recurring Dream," it was the kind of new age bullshit that he would have laughed at the week before. Now he devoured each word.

The thrust was simple. If you could realize you were dreaming you could take control of that dream. Do something outlandish, turn the dream in a completely different direction, and the dream would be excised. There would be no more reason for your mind to play it. He thought about this, kicking stones on the sidewalk as he went home. When she came that night he had an ax.

His gut felt tight but his insides loose, as if something was in there wanting to get out. He hefted the ax. His mind had captured it so well in this dream he saw the line of rust along the edges of the blade from being left in the shed out back. He felt the roughness of the wood handle. He smelled mold from the corner where it had lain. That scent clung to the ax as if it were the material out of which it had been forged. His fingers shook as he walked toward her. He heard a crack of thunder and it began to rain.

John sensed someone else on the street. A neighbor he'd never met, a blond haired woman in a green bathrobe, arranged trash cans on the curb two houses down. He slunk into the shadow of the porch and waited for her to finish. Crazy, he knew, but even in the dream he felt the need to be careful. When the woman was done and had retreated inside, he left the porch and wandered toward the dark haired dancer again. *Mi morena*, he thought, his dark haired beauty. Despite the horror she brought with her he would hate to see her go. When he reached her she was pirouetting, her bloody feet causing the movement to be jerky and off balance. When he lifted the ax, she stopped.

"You can't see me," he said. "You don't know I'm here. You're a figment of my imagination." He raised the ax. The rain pounded at his skull. The cool air wrapped itself around his wrists. *Whoosh*.

"No!" The ax slid into her side, and she screamed.

He jumped back. His pulse raced so fast he felt dizzy, like he was a kid again at the fair and on one of the rides, spinning around and around, sliding upside down so his stomach let loose and vomit fell with his pocket change to the ground.

The ax lodged in her body. Her eyes, which he noticed for the first time were a dark brown, were wide and scared as they had been the night before. A surge went through him.

"I'm sorry," he started before catching himself. He pulled the ax free, wrenching it from her flesh, watching the red of her blood begin to dye her dress and drip toward the ground. When the ax came free it came with a jerk and a squirt he heard as much as he saw. His own shirt became dyed to match her clothing, as if they were a couple

wearing complimentary costumes for Halloween. He reached toward her body where the blood was gushing. Then he brought the hand back to the ax. This was a dream. She wasn't real. Any other alternative was more than he could handle, more than he could accept. He raised the ax again.

The ax sliced into her right kneecap, a deliberate attack to the part of her body that enabled her dancing and thus enabled her to make him ache. She reached for her wound, bending so her hair hung toward the ground, her hands and her face hidden behind. Her movement kept him from seeing any additional features his dreaming mind might have included, a mouth open wide in a sob, color drained from her cheeks so what looked like porcelain before would now look ashy. Freedom! He hacked off one leg and then, when she fell, he hacked at the other. Bone was hard. His ax was sharper.

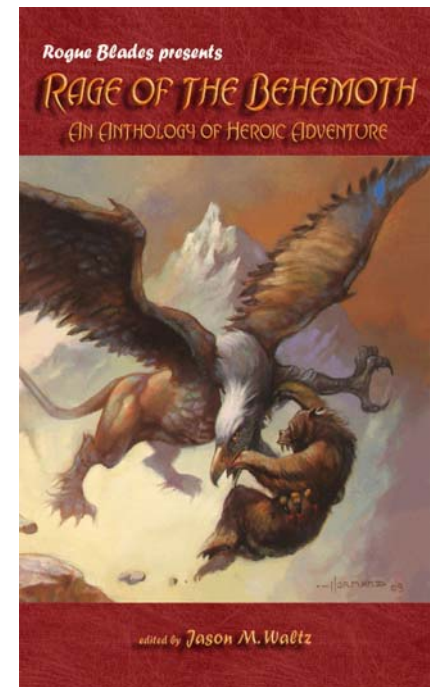
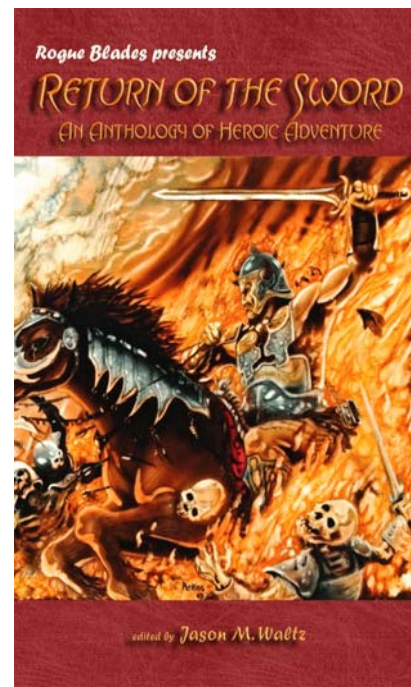
It was the most bizarre dream he'd ever had. She lay before him, a mannequin taken apart, a body devoid of legs, legs devoid of a body. He never remembered the dream after that, whether he'd gone inside or cleared her away, maybe placed her in the blond neighbor's trash can. All he remembered of the end of the dream were the legs and their worn and battered feet, the feet of a dancer.

John watched the news again the next day. The body of the nineteen year old girl who disappeared had been found. Her name was Maria Rodriguez, a prima ballerina who disappeared after a show. Her body had been found in the basement of a suburban home, the police having been called out due to strange noises and a neighbor's suspicion of domestic violence. The owner of the house admitted his guilt.

He took her, the man on the television said, so he could watch her dance. A cattle prod was found in the vicinity of the body. There were burn marks on her skin.

The only odd thing was that the man who admitted to kidnapping and torturing her claimed he didn't kill her, and although the body was mutilated, both legs cut off at the knee, those legs had not been found.

He saw the news and he chalked it up to coincidence. Either that or he was still dreaming. John went to the living room window. He reached to open the drapes. He smelled blood before he saw the stumps. Both severed legs dropped from behind the drapes. He knelt. He didn't touch the bloody stumps. He touched the heel of the nearest foot, felt a blister beneath his fingers, and imagined a pair of pink ballet shoes encasing the toes. ●



WHAT FRIENDS ARE FOR

Dev Jarrett

I watched the wizard sitting among the trash cans in the alley, the sleeve of his threadbare robe rolled up over a thin bicep. He lifted his wand, muttered the cantrip, and jabbed the tip of the wand into the vein in the crook of his elbow. His grimace relaxed and he exhaled a sigh. His wand fell from nerveless fingers and clattered softly to the pavement like a discarded chopstick as he nodded off. The kid couldn't have been more than twelve. Burning himself out already. What a waste.

I walked on. Doper kids are a sad bunch, but mostly they just hurt themselves. I had other fish to fry.

As I continued deeper into the alley, Furnunculus made some grumbling movement against my thigh. He made the sounds you'd expect from a gagged hostage. I lifted the small lead totem out of my pocket. He picked up on everything I could see, so I expected he had some wry, embittered criticism to offer on the state of kids these days.

His eyes swivelled toward my own, the irises black holes dug into the metal orbs. The totem was warm with life.

"What are you going on about?" I asked.

"The world would be so much better without any magic." His ridiculous lead nose overhung his mouth, and it wobbled with each word uttered.

I smiled. "You know, you're arguing against your own existence, Furn."

One eye rolled forward in a complete revolution, a movement I recognized as a wink. "Oh I'd exist, alright. But not like this."

The life leached out of the small lead face. The warmth faded and he became an inert thing again. I palmed him and placed him back in my pocket, where he bounced against my leg with every step. The weight on my thigh wasn't actually comfortable, but I know I'd feel odd without it. Like leaving the house without wearing my wristwatch.

The lowering Tucson sky threatened rain. The dark clouds covered

the firmament from horizon to horizon, but so far, the ground was still dry. Late July already, and the year's monsoon still hadn't delivered on any of its precipitative promises. Still, the clouds swirled slowly overhead, churning like the contents of a cauldron. A storm would be nice. Tamp down the road dust at least for a while, and relieve some of this infernal heat.

The alley ended in a cinderblock wall. Various graffiti tags competed for attention with fluorescent spraypaint and garish forms. Some of the runes were specifically designed to induce nausea. Why these kids would invest the time just to make someone feel sick is beyond me.

One sign did stand out as different. Looking at it made me feel cold. Hollowed-out.

It was a sigil. To those few that could understand the overlapping symbology, it was a sigil of great power. I didn't really get the outer ring of ideograms, but it had the smell of a protective ward. Walt told me when I left the office that the guy who etched this onto the cinderblock was someone who needed to be put down like some kind of mad dog. I'd thought Walt was kidding, but now I wasn't sure what to think. This guy was fiddling in old magic, and some of the things from the bad old days could destroy the world. Literally.

And that would really suck.

I could see where the spell was overlapped by a regular tag, and I knew whoever had placed that one had died a horrible death.

So the sigil was there, exactly where Walt had said it would probably be. That didn't bode well.

I reached into my jacket and retrieved the clicker. It was an oblong slip of rubber, with a pair of metal plates inside. I pressed on it until the plates clicked together, held the image of the office lobby in my mind, and stepped forward.

The office slammed into place around me, and my ears popped. The air conditioning was chilly against my skin. Sharon, the girl Walt had hired to answer the phone, looked up disinterestedly. Her jaw worked slowly, automatically, snapping her gum.

"Hey Steve," she said, barely staying awake. Her bleached hair looked stiff, like those thin white oriental noodles before they get cooked.

"Sharon. Walt still here?"

"Uhh." She looked lost.

"This is the only door into the office."

“Uhh.”

“Never mind. I’ll check.”

I shouldered my way through the door, and found Walt already getting into the booze. He’d fallen off the wagon again, but whatever. He functioned well enough on the job, and with this job, anything that got him through the night was fine with me.

He looked up at me, tried on a guilty look, then thought better of it. He poured a few fingers of amber liquid into a tall glass.

“Care to join me?”

“Nah. Still on the clock.”

“Suit yourself,” he smiled as he sat back with the glass.

“I just wanted to check the map again. The last sigil checked out.”

“Yeesh. That means he’s all set up.”

He snapped his fingers, and the surface of the desk lit up with the crosshatched map of downtown. A few grunts and whistles, and the map zoomed down to the scale we needed. Twenty sigils, spaced evenly on walls all across downtown.

Walt summoned an overlay of the town’s ley lines, and did a few calculations. The nexus of power in the lines fell nowhere close to the geographic center of the layout of the sigils. It was far to the south, near one of the reservation casinos. I was pretty familiar with that one, and not because I had a weakness for Let It Ride or Texas Hold ‘Em. One of the Blackjack dealers was a green-eyed redhead who knew how to make a guy smile.

“How much time?”

“Full moon will be in the right constellation around dusk. About a fifteen-minute window that’ll open in half an hour.”

As he spoke, a pale white globe rose from the desk’s horizon, and arced through nearly eighty degrees.

“Guess I’d better get going, then.”

“Take your wand. This guy means business.”

“Got it,” I said as I patted my shoulder holster, making the tip of the wand dig into my belt.

“Good luck, Steve.”

“Thanks, Walt.”

I left his office, and in the lobby I popped the clicker. I stepped instantly into the foyer at Apache Flats Casino. The cascade of coins, the music of the slot machines, and the flashing lights were a little overwhelming after the quiet of the office. Old ladies who’d already converted their pension checks into big plastic cups of silver dollars

waddled from machine to machine, feeding coins into several simultaneously. What the hell, I thought. Someone’s got to win, right?

I exited the building, and the heat hit me like a hammer. Overhead, thick clouds tumbled over, under, and through one another. Heavy, fat, black clouds. They seemed to look smug about holding back the rain. The sun was nowhere in sight, but I knew it must be nearing the western horizon by now.

My pocket warmed up, and I felt more than heard Furn talking.

“What?” I asked as I lifted him into view.

“Every time you use that clicker thing, I get dizzy as hell.”

“That’s not even possible. You don’t have an inner ear.”

His nostrils flared as he smiled. “And yet, I hear every word you say. Neat how that works, huh?”

“Furn, I’m going to need you on this one. Keep an eye out for me, okay?”

“Can do. Listening to you and Walt, it sounds pretty serious. You’re out of your depth, pard.”

“Thanks for your vote of confidence.”

“Hey,” he smiled, “what are friends for?”

I shucked him back into my pocket, and made my way out of the parking lot and down the street. Minutes later, I was standing outside an old warehouse. The rusted chain on the door had recently been cut through, and the doorpost was spattered ritualistically with blood.

“This looks like the place.” I sighed, then opened the door.

The floor of the warehouse was huge. The middle of the room was wide open and cleared out, except for several fat candles in a ring in the center. Just outside the ring of candles, a bald man knelt.

The door closed behind me, echoing through the cavernous warehouse. The man looked up, smiling a zealot’s smile.

“Welcome, brother, to the birth of the future.”

“Let’s not count those chickens just yet, nut bag.” I reached under my jacket for my wand, but before I could draw it, the man spoke again.

“Before? But the spell is cast! It’s done. It’s already begun to happen! Prepare to bask in the glories of the new God!”

Even as he spoke, the thin candle flames stretched upward. Like cords, the flames stretched up and up, dividing, turning over each other, and weaving together as they lengthened. After only a few seconds, the weaving began to take shape. A big shape.

I gestured with my wand, hoping to cut off whatever it was from its

source. The candles flew from their places across the room, but the flames continued to grow from the same points. They'd already burned through to the other side of reality, and whatever was coming through was feeding the flames. I began to discern its arms and legs as the thin flames continued their infernal weaving.

"Yes! Yes! Come forth, my Lord!" The bald man was in a religious ecstasy, shrieking his love and devotion to this thing emerging into the world. His arms waved over his head as he danced some jittery, spastic mambo.

The cords of flame spun faster, weaving the body of the thing. Like some huge scorpion, the thing had many legs and a pair of claws slung low and forward. As the form grew more and more complete, the flames dimmed and disappeared altogether. The red, chitinous carapace of the beast gleamed as though lit from within, and threads of fire skated across the surface.

I threw an icy blast from my wand, but it quickly diminished to steam with no effect on the creature.

The bald man laughed at my efforts. His laugh abruptly turned into a scream of agony as the creature seized him in one of its claws. It squeezed, and the man vomited a gush of blood. Raising the man high into the air, the creature negligently flexed its claw again. The bald man fell in two gore streaked pieces to thud meatily on the cement floor of the warehouse.

"Wanted: one high priest. Immediate opening available. Apply in person." The wand was slippery in my sweaty palm. I sent a jet of fire into the beast, to no avail. The fire got its attention, though, and its heavy steps toward me sent tiny chips of concrete flying in all directions. I dove behind a stack of pallets.

"Furn! Any advice would be really appreciated here!"

With my off hand, I pulled the totem from my pocket.

"Got your gun?"

"Sure, but—"

"Shoot it!"

"Shoot a creature from the netherworld with a gun? Crazy talk! I'm serious, Furn!"

"Do it! You know as well as I do it's never been just silver bullets that do the job. Purity is the killer of these things! Pure silver, pure lead, pure love, whatever you've got! Use it!"

I drew down on the creature. Not knowing where to go for the killshot, I emptied the magazine into the area of its face.

It raised itself on a couple of pairs of hind legs and roared in anger and pain. Gouts of some pus-colored fluid leaked from its head onto the concrete floor, where it bubbled and smoked. A gigantic claw smashed down onto the pallets, turning them into splinters and sawdust, and I ran. As I ran, I socked home my other magazine and cocked the pistol.

On the far side of the room, panting, I stopped behind a rusty I-beam and tried to steady myself. The creature saw me and strode forward with its pile driver steps. The claw grabbed the I-beam and bit into it, the steel squealing in protest. I raised my pistol to the joint just behind the claw, and fired twice.

The creature yanked itself back with another earsplitting roar, leaving the claw attached to the I-beam, streamers of connective tissue hanging from the ruined joint.

The rest of the bullets in the gun went into the face again, and the creature, at last, began to back away. The bilious yellow blood began to flow more freely from its wounds, and it staggered as it walked.

It looked hurt, but by then I realized my own mistake. Both of the magazines that I usually carried were emptied. My wand did nothing to the beast, and if I didn't kill it, Walt had said we could look forward to a thousand years of Old Testament-style wrath and torture.

When it saw that my shots had stopped, it grew bolder. The creature came forward, warily this time, sidling through its own acidic blood.

Furnunculus was talking again.

"Finish it off! Do it!"

"Can't. I'm null and void. No ammo."

"Purity! Anything pure!"

"Like I said, I'm tapped out."

I'd nearly made up my mind to just haul ass out of there and fight it some other day, when Furn spoke again.

"Pure anything. One more hit should do the trick, Steve."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm pure lead. Probably purer than those bullets you've been using. Hit it with me."

"Furn! I can't do that! You're my friend!"

"If you don't kill it, you will be responsible for everything it does. All the destruction, all the killing, everything! You've got to stop it. We've got to stop it."

"But Furn," I started. My throat grew tight.

"Steve, throw me hard and throw me straight. Let's kill this thing."

My vision starred and doubled. The tears were sudden and hot. Furnunculus and I had been through so much over the years. We were friends, buddies, comrades-in-arms. We were brothers.

"Do it, Steve."

I sighed, knowing he was right. I wiped my eyes as I stepped out from behind the I-beam, and I lined up on the creature. Just as Furn instructed, I threw him hard and straight. I thought I heard him laugh, exultant, as he flew through the air.

He struck the beast perfectly between the eyes, and that's when the bellowing truly started. The creature clawed at its head as it roared, then tried to rub its face against the concrete to get rid of the horrible pain. It trembled, shrieking, then collapsed onto its own legs. The roar of its agony was nearly deafening.

Several minutes later, it shuddered and died, and its body began to disintegrate immediately. I stood, put my wand back into its holster, and made my way back to the door.

The obtrusive weight I'd grown so used to having in my front pocket was missing, and with it, one of my closest friends. He was gone. The space Furn was supposed to occupy, both in my pocket and somewhere deeper inside me, was empty.

Who knows, maybe it wasn't just pure lead that did the beast in.

Outside, the rain finally began to fall on Tucson as I walked back down the block toward the casino. It wasn't a cleansing rain, but looking rained-on sure beat looking like I'd been crying. ●



Coming in 2009 from Bad Moon Books

Mention this ad and receive 10% off purchase of any book from our website



The Adventures of Mr Maximillian Bacchus
and his Travelling Circus
by Clive Barker

Trade edition, 1500 copies
Signed by Clive Barker, \$50

300 limited/slipcased
Signed by Clive Barker, \$125

Inquire about Lettered and Ultra Editions

Also, be sure not to miss...



LITTLE
GRAVEYARD
ON THE PRAIRIE
by Steven E. Wedel

Signed & Numbered Hardcover
100 copies, \$50

THE
Hunger
of Empty Vessels

by Scott Edelman

Signed & Numbered Paperback
150 copies, \$15



AS FATE WOULD HAVE IT

by Michael Louis Calvillo

Signed & Numbered Hardcover
150 copies, \$50

www.badmoonbooks.com



THE NIGHT GUEST

Jason Hardy

I woke from fitful slumber to the faint tickle of a spider picking its way up my forearm. Blinking sleep from my eyes, I shifted upright to get a better look at the delicate intruder. As if sensing my attention, the spider froze, one translucent leg aloft, the other seven camouflaged among the wispy hairs of my arm.

Last summer, I'd sealed the house with pitch—every crack and every crevice. Spiders, insects, and the like had been infrequent visitors ever since, but this fellow was small enough that he might easily have thieved a ride, unnoticed, on the cuff of my pants. Presently, I was more concerned with how he would exit the place, and reached for a handkerchief to expedite the matter.

Across the room, the curtains twitched and billowed, and I felt the chill of night air. The window sash was raised several inches. *Strange*, I thought. It explained the spider, but I was sure I hadn't opened it.

Fully awake now, I looked around the room, increasingly aware of a soft scraping sound. The long window bent moonlight askant floor and wall, and I blinked at what I saw in the ambient glow.

My timepiece was moving slowly across the dresser, seeming to float just above the wood and dragging its chain like a long, limp tail. The timepiece was not alone. Squinting, I recognized two jeweled rings following a short distance behind, gliding just above the dresser surface.

A sudden clatter to my right. I started at the noise, then settled when I saw the cause of it: my reading glasses had fallen from the nightstand. I leaned over the edge of the bed to collect them, but before I could, they jerked tipsily into motion and retreated beyond my reach. As I stared, disbelieving, they continued to inch across the floor in eager starts and stops, lenses facing down, as if bent to the scrutiny of some blind text etched upon the planks.

A dream, I told myself. *A hallucination*.

But somehow I knew it wasn't so. Even as I watched my glasses'

progress, the toe of one of my slippers pushed out from under the bed.

I waited until the entire slipper was in view, then reached down and seized it, pulling it to my chest. The floor beneath was marked with a dark stain, which began to dissipate almost immediately, scattering in all directions. Part of the stain moved into the silver rectangle of moonlight and I recognized a familiar shape: spiders. Spiders by the dozen.

My timepiece had almost reached the edge of the dresser. I flung the slipper at it, but missed high; the leather sole slapped against the wall and the slipper dropped down behind the furniture. Undeterred, the timepiece began to scale the curtain, ascending the fabric cautiously but determinedly toward the open window.

I felt a sharp prick on my forearm. The solitary spider, which I'd quite forgotten, had returned my attack in kind and now was fleeing along my wrist. Quick as it was, my free hand was quicker, and the flesh-on-flesh sound of its end echoed in the chamber.

I picked the crushed black shape from my skin and flung it to the floor, then swung out of bed. I felt uneasy about my bare feet with so many spiders about, but didn't see the point of putting on just one slipper.

The timepiece had already passed beyond the windowsill and out of view. I forced the window open as far as the frame would bear and swept my hand along the side of the house below. Leaning further out, I looked down, and a chill gripped my heart.

In the yard below, a man stood by the leaning willow. He was thin and ragged, clad in a traveler's cloak, and lank hair obscured his face. He whistled a low, toneless note, yet never he stopped to breathe. At his feet was a large square of coarse fabric, and on it were spread several of my belongings: my wallet, a pair of gloves, a book I'd left upon the desk.

"You there!" I shouted. "Whatever trick you're playing, stop at once."

A clinking sound drew my attention back inside the room. The two rings were just about to reach the curtain, and I swatted them with the back of my hand, sending the rings and several thick-legged spiders skittering back across the dresser. My reading glasses halted halfway across the floor, their lenses now angled upward so that they seemed to be taking my measure. I took a single step toward them, and they scuttled back out of range.

I turned back to the window as the man stepped forward into full

moonlight. He raised his head, and his hair fell back to reveal a gaunt face and eyes glazed with cataracts. He kept whistling that unwavering note, which seemed kin to a chill autumn wind, born from dark places and whispering of ruin.

"You can't take those things," I yelled. "Toss them back up here. I'll have the wallet first." His appearance troubled me, and I did not want to go downstairs to confront him on even ground.

The stranger's milky eyes tracked slowly upward until they found mine. His whistling lowered in pitch, wavering, then trailed off. Though the sound had only lingered at the edge of perception, in its absence the world seemed unnaturally still, as if cricket and night bird alike had been ushered away or bidden to keep their peace. The visitor raised a hand to point, and moonlight glinted off the crescent curve of a knife blade.

"Ought to take care of that wound," he said. His voice was a ragged croak. "Looks bad."

I touched my arm where the spider had bitten me, and winced. The wound was now an inch-wide gash; blood ran down my forearm and had begun to drip from my fingertips. I clamped my hand over the injury. When I looked at the man again, I noticed that his knife tip bore a dark stain.

"I'll shut the window," I called, my voice rising, becoming less my own. "You'll get no more from me."

But as I reached to grasp the sash, I felt a tickle upon my neck. Other tickles followed as spiders settled on my feet, legs, and chest, bumps moving beneath my nightshirt. I stiffened at the sensation.

The man's lips curled into something resembling a smile. He tapped the knife lightly against his throat, the threat in the gesture unmistakable. "Best let them come. Their sting's nastier than it seems." Then he inclined his head, stepped back into the shadow of the willow, and the whistling began anew. Around me, I sensed the spiders resuming their raid, all but the one perched on my throat. One of its legs had begun to drum rhythmically against my larynx. Without seeing, I knew that the man beneath the willow kept the knife's edge to his own throat, tapping the same slow beat.

My arm was still bleeding badly. Carefully, keeping my neck as straight as possible, I stepped back from the window and bound my wound in a folded length of bed sheet. After that, I could only watch as the spiders hunted, moving freely from room to room, taking everything they could bear upon their backs. When the thief's fabric was covered

three times over with my possessions both valuable and worthless, he brought up all four corners and twisted them together. The resulting sack bulged so grotesquely, I thought he'd never lift it. But he did, slinging it over his shoulder as if it were a child's thing.

The instant he turned away, I reached for the spider upon my throat, wanting nothing so much as to hurl it down and crush it underfoot. But even as he fled the yard, the man raised the crescent blade high overhead, and the sight of it stopped my hand. He headed for the woods, and the ground itself seemed to trail after him like a cloak—so legion were his followers. When he had gained the treeline, the remaining spider suddenly leapt to the curtain, then to the windowsill, and into the night, hurrying after its master. And I was left bleeding by the open window, sentry to a chill and empty room. ●

Coming April 1, 2009

for the *Call of Cthulhu*® roleplaying game.

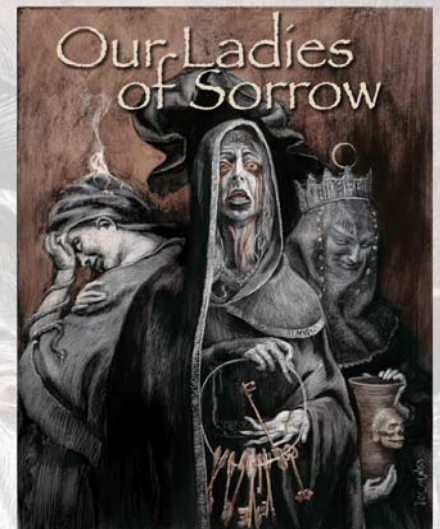
A contemporary adventure for *Call of Cthulhu* from master scenarist Kevin Ross, author of *Kingsport*, *City in the Mists*, *Escape from Innsmouth*, *Sacraments of Evil*, and many more.

"An apartment building haunted by something that taunts, and tempts—and kills..."

"A lonely desert where the wind whispers and the borders of reality fade..."

"A flood-drenched town stalked by ghosts and other, more solid nightmares..."

\$34.95 plus S&H. approx. 176 pages.



www.miskatonicriverpress.com

CTHULHU'S NIGHTMARE

Bric Barnes

Somewhere in the South Pacific, hidden in the ocean vast where it is surrounded by nothing else, lies a tiny atoll said to be haunted with the memories of demons. Cold and barren, composed entirely of rock, it is a place with no name and no inhabitants; no one ever goes there unless they have to—to fix the antenna housed at the top of a giant transmission tower.

On a night when the clouds hid the stars, and in the darkened sky only the moon shone through, there came a violent burst from below the earth's crust that shook the waters and a scarlet red exploded from out of the sea, spewing molten stone and pumice. Soon the moon had disappeared and an island stood where placid waters once rippled in gentle repose. The wind howled and lightning flared across the heavens. For just an instant a tomb was exposed. Upon a naked slab of stone lay a casket.

The long rest hadn't done Cthulhu any good. The nightmares had come back. Where once his dreams had filled the minds of his followers, influencing them in the ways of the Mythos, now he could not get past that ever-present voice that clouded his head.

"Ask Miss Clio. She knows everythin', darlin. Ya might think ya been fooling everyone. But the devil himself is on to ya, and only Miss Clio knows what to do. The stars don't lie. Let me chart them for you. You'll be shocked to know what I already know. Just pick up the phone and ask for Miss Clio. You'll be connected immediately. Ya haven't a minute to lose. Call her. She's waiting for ya."

It was the same thing every time R'lyeh rose. His mind would go blank and then he'd hear naught but that wretched woman with her in-and-out-of-it Jamaican accent, and see those arms outstretched, a crystal ball between her cupped hands. His every waking thought was of her. She was everywhere, bombarding both the TV and the radio with her ads. It was Miss Clio this, and Miss Clio that. There were

simply no stations she wasn't on. Even the Internet offered no refuge. Many was the time that Cthulhu had brought an ISP to a crawl with the response from followers to his queries, but now his mailbox was filled with nothing other than the spam from (and for) Miss Clio. And those pop-up windows in his browser were enough to drive a sane man mad, let alone a God.

Damn that Azathoth. Not only was he a blind idiot, filled with babble and blasphemous thought, he was a bungler, too. The idea of CHAOS—concentrated havoc attacking orderly systems—was meant to tear down the structures man needed to survive. That was the purpose of the plan. And when a city was created from whence to practice and it was named the same, that, too, made sense. But no form of chaos was supposed to wreak such mayhem on the ancient ones. Or so it had been decreed. And it was not to be in the hands of mortals. Yet there, along side the fine print of the psychic's disclaimer, was the copyright for Azathoth Promotions. The idiot had commercialized his concept for chaos, created a generic package, and was selling it on the market. The whole thing had given Cthulhu a headache the size of a hidden universe, one that was spinning out of control. And there seemed to be nothing he could do about it.

Escape was impossible. The old ways no longer worked. He had lost his taste for the simple things. Drinking blood and gnawing on human bones made him queasy. It was hard to believe that he'd once feasted on them. And countless shots of finely aged brandy accomplished nothing.

Perhaps his brother, Cthugha, had been right. Retirement no longer seemed to be a curse. Besides, those fire vampires sure could dance the Watusi. He started to smile at the thought and then his head began to swirl.

"Are ya calling Miss Clio? Hoot, mon. Ya can't help yourself. Only Miss Clio has the power. And she's waiting for ya. Call her now."

Blast that witch! Why wouldn't she leave him alone? Couldn't she tell what she was doing to him? He wanted to scream. Or to push the island back under the sea, where he could sleep and hide. But it was too early for that. The stars were not yet realigned for it. His casket amply stocked, he opened a dark beer for a chaser and began to imbibe.

Lost in thought, he almost missed the phone. It was Yig.

"I just caught the news and noticed that R'lyeh had risen. The stock is selling for a profit today. It was in the green. I'm thinking of shorting

it.”

“That’s nice, Yig. But I don’t really care. I’m sure it’ll be in the red tomorrow. I’ve got other problems.” Then he related his tale of woe.

Though Yig listened carefully, he didn’t appear overly bothered. “It’s not as bad as what happened to the snake I left in Mr. Eden’s garden, but I’m sorry to hear it. We Gods have to stick together. Want me to send over one of my snake dancers?”

A pang of ennui passed through Cthulhu. Here was yet another diversion he had tired of.

“Thanks. But I want to be left alone.”

“What about hiring a lawyer and getting an injunction? Surely there has to be a way you can stop that woman from her incessant yammering. Maybe I’ll join you for a class action suit.”

Letting loose a sigh, Cthulhu, high priest of the Old Ones, noted how far they’d fallen. Hiring a lawyer was a low mark indeed for a God. A breed to be avoided; even the devil himself stayed away from them. Though they were fashionably garbed, cloaked in the letter of the law, lawyers were a curse upon the very people they were supposed to represent. He had not forgotten the indignity of having to hock his bat wings to pay for court fees. Damn that last barrister and his accursed work! Why couldn’t that part of the past stay buried?

Not that it mattered. Cthulhu knew well of the way of justice, there was none. That was part of the plan. And it had worked. It was all mumbo jumbo. But now he rued a past he once ruled. He needed help and it wasn’t there to be found. A lawyer was not the answer.

“Mon! Have ya not been listening? Miss Clio is still waiting for ya. Time is fleeting. And Miss Clio knows what ails ya. Only she can cure ya. Pick up the phone. Do it, Mon. Ya won’t be sorry.”

He was already sorry, and he didn’t think he could take it anymore. Slamming the phone down in anger, he disconnected himself from Yig. There would be plenty of time for crashing markets. Then, grimacing and mumbling an incantation old as the stars themselves, he lifted the receiver and unleashed a primordial scream from a faded bag of tricks.

A bolt of lightning struck the earth near him. It left a note. It was from Miss Clio. Then everything disappeared in a cloud of cannabis.

He was suddenly sitting at a table with a Rastafarian, the scent of marijuana and incense wafting through the room.

“Who are you?”

“I’m the Rasta Man, and I’ve come to prepare ya for Miss Clio.”

“Where are we? And how did I get here?”

“We are inside your head. It’s a place ya can’t escape from.”

“Inside my head?” He was shocked. “How can that be? Have my powers all left me? Where are my followers?” The Rasta Man smiled and lit up another spliff. He took a deep drag and offered it to Cthulhu. A tentacle reached out reflexively.

Stopping himself short, the green being with the head of an octopus blinked, not once, but twice.

“Don’t you know who I am?” he shouted.

“Mon, ya don’ have ta yell. No wonder you’ve come to Miss Clio. Ya bin tied up in knots.”

It was true. He could control his body no longer. His appendages were twisted and overlaid. His bat wings had been shorn, and the nails of his talons clipped. Powerless to protest, he felt himself getting giggly. The smoke from the jay was giving him a contact high.

When R’lyeh next rose, there was an empty and opened coffin lying upon a stone slab. Beside it lay a cadaver unlike any other. Green and slimy, its head was that of an octopus with a dozen tentacles. Wrapped around its back was a pair of shorn bat wings. Instead of hands it had talons, the fingernails of which had been clipped. And on its feet, was a pair of sandals.

An engineer was looking at the body. Opening its mouth, he was struck by the scent of good sensimillion.

“Looks and smells like he died happy,” said his partner. “But who was he?”

“His name was Cthulhu. He was one of the high priests of a race of great old ones. But his time had passed him by. He no longer had the ability to fill men’s minds with dark images, and was feared no more. It had been said that he would yet rise from out of the waters and his minions would once again rule the Earth.”

“Really? How do you know all this?”

“My great-great grandfather belonged to his cult. I come from a long line of druids.”

“What happened?”

“As I said, times have changed. There’s too much static and interference in the airwaves today for that kind of thought sharing.”

He shrugged his shoulders and adjusted an infrared light.

“Do you see that receiver over there?” He pointed towards the open coffin. It was equipped with the most modern of conveniences. Air conditioned and centrally heated, it had a wide screen TV and a cable

Internet connection.

"This all looks pretty high tech."

"It is. The Gods were very wealthy beings. They lived and died in luxury."

"Isn't that the way of it? We're just a couple of poor working stiffs. But what's that got to do with this?"

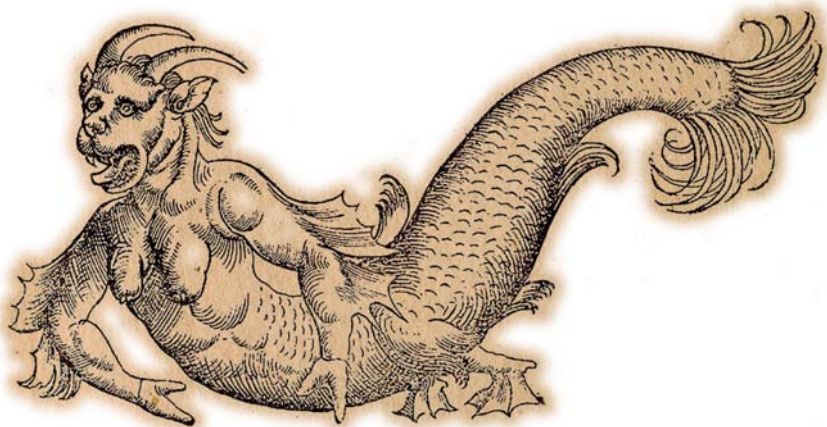
"It was the cable feed. He ordered a 24-hour, 7-days-a-week feed of *Dark Shadows*. But someone frakked it and he was instead getting a continuous feed of some commercial. It finally shorted out and that's why we're here."

Flipping the lid of the coffin so that it was upside down, the engineer pulled off a panel. Then he opened a plastic container and slid into his hand a network card wrapped in its covering. It read: Cable Linked Imaging Overlay. After removing and tossing aside some charred chips, he took the covering off and slid the card into an open slot. Then his partner entered a code on a notebook and the receiver began to hum.

"What do we do with the body?"

"We'll put him back in and close it up. He's still got a contract. At least that way the feed will have an audience."

It wasn't too much later that the engineers left, the transmission continuing. And this story could have ended there. But as it so happens, there's an unpublished legend in the *Necronomicon* that somewhere, deep in the Pacific, an ancient one, with the head of an octopus, dances the Watusi with a Rasta woman. And one day, everyone else will do it too. ●



COMPOSITIONS IN GRATITUDE AND SORROW

Bret Tallman

It occurred to him, as he bit into a mango that burned the cracks in his lips, that he was having trouble remembering his own name. He paused in his chewing, the stinging all around his mouth getting savage, and it came into focus. Geoff Hayden. He still couldn't remember the fiddler's name, though, or when he'd hired him to serenade his meals.

Geoff lifted a chalice heavy with fluid, hoping to wash the citrus from his lips, and managed to dribble down his shirtfront. Every cup seemed cracked and his clothes were scored with stains. The fiddler watched him with great gray eyes amidst scalloped rills of flesh, but never wavered in the slow sweep of his bow hand.

Geoff fidgeted, ashamed of the mess, and snatched a dark red drumstick from a platter steaming with them. He tore the meat with his teeth and the heat tickled his nose. Now that he remembered his name, the place didn't look right. He sat on a wooden bench at a table that was just a flat sheet of iron. No, his real life was couched in expensive leather and hummed with tiny electronics.

"Stop playing," he slurred through the syrupy film coating his tongue. When the deep slow voice of the violin's strings didn't stop, he panicked and screamed, "Stop it!"

The fiddler shook his cankered head but lowered the bow. Geoff truly saw him then, saw that he wasn't a man, had never been a man, had no origin common with a man. And he saw on his table a smorgasbord of deepest crimson and palest purple.

Geoff lurched to his feet, overturning the bench, trying to vomit and failing. He understood that he had tried before and failed then too. Through the window, a perfect circle cut through rough stone, he saw the other towers like his, impossibly massive spears that had thrust outward from the forge at the center of the world, cracking continents and sinking seas. The skewered world below looked a bit smaller than last time, he could have reached out and palmed it like a basketball,

and still the towers reached further into the void.

They were on their way to a reckoning; but the sailing was slow and that was part of the pain.

Were the others here? His wife Sharon with her flabby, striated thighs and her ever-youthful material wants? Or their son Hunter with his head full of questions and fears? Or his mistress Brianna with her dusky backwards glances?

Geoff snarled at their needs and bolted across the room and out into a curving hallway ringed with identical doors. He staggered from one to the other, glimpsing torment and degradation in each room. It was all self-administered. They were all men.

"It isn't fair," Geoff Hayden whined. "All those eyes on you. You have to carry people or you'll be alone."

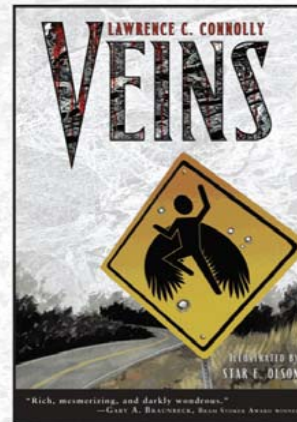
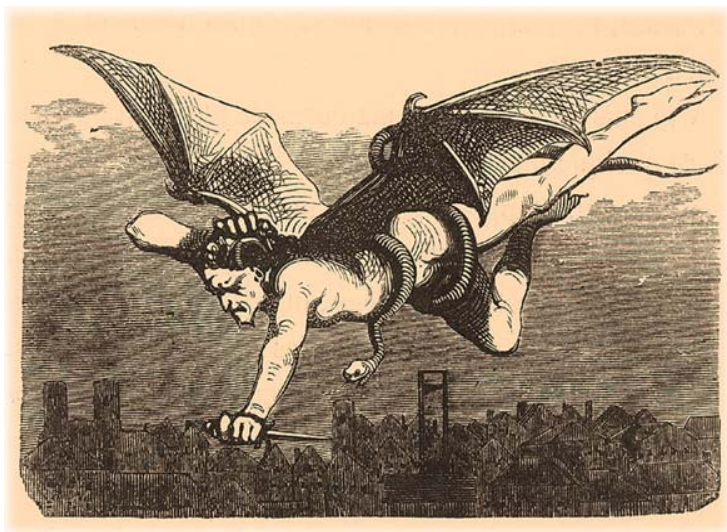
The men in the rooms didn't answer. They had taken the same shortcuts he had; they had calculated success with black equations older than mountains.

After a time, he returned to his room. He frowned at the creature with the violin, the only one of its kind he had seen, and asked, "Do I know you?"

The fiddler's voice was the sound of dead bark torn. "Yes. You once did me a kindness I have long remembered, even in this place."

Geoff nodded, indistinctly, but didn't really remember. He righted the bench, slick from a sticky puddle on the floor, and sat, resting his elbows on the table, charnel dishes spread before him.

He said, "Thank you. And play on." ●



On the 2008 Bram Stoker Award Preliminary Ballot and nominated by the editors of *Dark Scribe Magazine* for a 2008 Black Quill Award.

Fleeing from what should have been a perfect crime, Axle and his accomplices race into the Pennsylvania highlands with a briefcase full of cash. On their tail, a tattooed madman who wants them dead.

Axle knows the landscape and the perfect hideout: the crater of an abandoned mine. But terrible things happened there. Things he has spent years trying to forget.

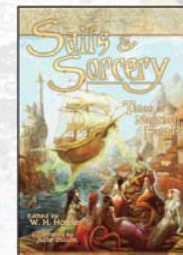
Enter Kwetis, the nightflyer. Part memory, part nightmare, Kwetis has planned a heist of his own, and soon, everyone will learn that each of them is a piece of a plan devised long ago by the spirits of the Earth.

"Feels like some of the best magic realism that's been written lately . . . highly readable."—*BookSpotCentral.com*



Trade Paperback • 260 Pages • 8 Illustrations • \$15.00
ISBN 13: 978-1-934571-00-2 • ISBN 10: 1-934571-00-8

www.VeinsTheNovel.com | www.FEBooks.net



INCLUDES CONTRIBUTIONS BY LAWRENCE C. CONNOLLY

Featuring "Beerwulf" and 23 stories that will tickle your funny bone while quenching your thirst for adventure, *Bash Down the Door and Slice Open the Badguy* is a veritable chorus line of worthless warriors,

simpleton sorcerers, and hapless henchmen.

Sails and Sorcery features 28 stories of mermaids, pirates, and magic beyond your wildest dreams as well as an introduction by Lawrence C. Connolly and an afterword by Mark Summers & John Baur, creators of International Talk Like a Pirate Day.

Look for the soundtrack to the novel, composed and performed by the author, Lawrence C. Connolly. Coming soon from Fantasist Enterprises!



A CURSE IN ANY LANGUAGE

Matt Finucane

William Burroughs wrote that the word is a virus. He was foolish and wrong about a lot of things, but in this he was correct.

My girlfriend was always into trying new modes, testing herself, learning new languages. In a quiet unforced way, one that would have made her a resourceful and useful person someday, an asset to the world. It was there to see in her kindness and percipience, so nearly matured and so near finding an outlet.

Yes, a real tangible asset to this fucking world. If she'd lived.

She died at twenty-two in a way so horrible it makes me want to run out into the streets and stab every person I see. The couples, the singles, young, old, male, female... To destroy everyone and everything.

And perhaps I can.

I wouldn't even need that knife, nor any other weapon you'd understand.

When this nauseating rage achieves a balance with its polar opposite—of not caring at all—I may well try to find out.

My conscience is clear, though—I'll leave it somewhere, maybe somewhere it won't be found, and let chance do the rest.

We'll see.

It began and ended with one of her new languages.

I got back to the flat and found her home unexpectedly, with a pile of books.

"You okay?" I said, assuming she'd left early with a bug or cold; she was a dedicated worker. I will happily make her former office my first target.

They gave her the book. Why? And what was it doing there? But that's irrelevant.

"Yeah, fine, thanks. Look at this." She held out the book, open at two yellowed pages of scrawled handwriting. "They were clearing out

the basement archives and found this old thing. Nobody could figure out what it was so they let me take it."

"Any idea what it is?"

"I'm not sure—it's like... like someone trying to invent a new language. Here, see what you reckon."

I see her like this often, offering me the weapon.

[.....]

That's what the hose is for, yes, and the drains. No mess.

Hard work, but could be worse.

Never. I've made it a point of pride never to call for help, partly as I'm not sure if the panic button works anymore. Not been serviced that I'm aware of, cutbacks and that.

Still—I expect that's partly why you're here. The Man from the Ministry, as they say.

Wouldn't be time to get to the intercom, good grief no.

Don't look so worried; still, you look very young to be an administrator. Fast track, I expect, clever. You won't have seen the sharp end of it before.

Worry not---I can always tell when we're due for another one: instinct. It'll be a while.

Been a quiet few days, actually. I feel nice and rested, good for staying alert.

Sometimes it gets very hectic.

They come trooping through that door like I don't know what.

All sorts. You never know what to expect, varies enormously.

Some could, yes. Others could never pass for human, not in a million years. Have we got a million years, do you think?

No but seriously. Horrible, some of them. You've just had lunch, haven't you.

Stop worrying. There's the five minute warning, and look at the door—look how big the hinges are. Weighs a couple of tons at least.

...Yes, some of them can be rather nasty.

Well, I was reading in the news about those scientists, the argument, about whether these are really living creatures at all. Bit complicated to follow—especially rushing about with work—but maybe you can explain it to me.

Well, not many can. I mean, it's a funny kind of problem.

I think it was bacteria, that was the example. Something similar. Some sort of ocean microbe, or was it mineral, mixed with pollution

and started moving about. The other idea sounds like bollocks: something to do with a book that infected people, some fella started spreading it around. Heard that one?

Imagine that, the door opens and out comes fuck knows what, all dripping from the sea. Because of a book. Nah.

Of course I've got regrets, but it's good money, not that Municipal Currency rubbish: I can keep a nice full fridge.

Back to business. This is the modulator, yes. Special frequency, harmless to humans but blows them apart. All a bit mucky, hence the drains. One way of telling if they're real people or not, I suppose.

My apologies—bad joke. It can be upsetting if they look more or less normal, yes, but you never forget what'll happen to you if they touch you.

[.....]

"It was a camping holiday with a girl I met at a festival.

"Never mind that, she was a sweet Euro-babe and I wanted to get in bed with her but wasn't sure she was up for it. She was a space cadet, leylines and earth-lights, UFOs—magic mushrooms, crappy trance music, that kind of thing. Wanted to recreate the festival vibe, so we went camping in some fields in the middle of nowhere. I forget if we were looking for ghosts or flying saucers."

"The girl's name was Kelli Nyquist," said one of the scientists.

"Yes, and I realised she didn't fancy me after all, so I drank all her apple gin and passed out. Woke up for a piss in the middle of the night and went into the forest. You know, maybe a puke or a dump too."

"And that's where you found the device," said one of the labcoats.

"Yep, that's where I found the 'device,' if you mean that book." Scott realised something was wrong with him; he kept talking to anchor himself as his vision began to flicker and cut out at the edges. "You know all this already. So what's the story?" They must have slipped him something in his water; any minute now he was going to keel over in this chair and get away from the overpowering smell of these men's mingling aftershaves. The smell filled his head like the light, which was growing speckled and heavy. "I found the book just lying there... So I picked it up and it felt a bit strange, like I knew it wanted to be read—I'm not rambling am I, except I am, and jeez I need to lie down..."

One of the scientists knelt before him, but not close. "How long now since you've been exposed? What symptoms have you noticed?"

"Err... Help me out here."

"Unusual rashes or skin discolorations, altered diet, anything like that. And did you read the book?"

Scott was now canted at an angle that showed him the underside of the plastic chairs facing him and the shiny shoes of his questioners. He giggled. "Come to think of it, yes. Funny thing..."

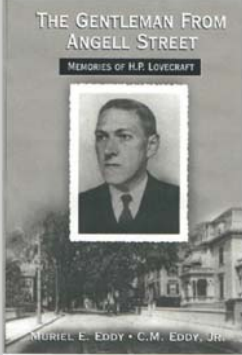
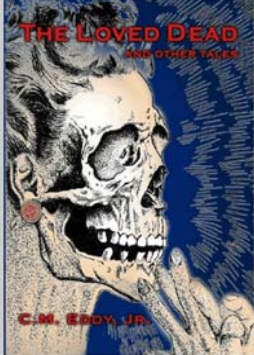

"What?"

"The last half of it was missing. The pages had been torn out."

His concentration was shading away into faintness, his grip on consciousness softly pried away as a grey bubble settled over him. Through his fattened tongue, he asked, "Did I mention I gave the book to Kelli?"

He just had time to enjoy their looks of confused fear before the toxin shrank and compacted him to nothing. ●

FROM THE PAGES OF THE PAST

 <p>THE GENTLEMAN FROM ANGELL STREET MEMORIES OF H.P. LOVECRAFT</p> <p>MURIEL E. EDDY • C.M. EDDY, JR.</p> <p>ISBN 9780970169914 \$9.95</p>	 <p>THE LOVED DEAD AND OTHER TALES</p> <p>C.M. EDDY, JR.</p> <p>ISBN 9780970169921 \$16.95</p>	 <p>EXIT INTO ETERNITY TALES OF THE BIZARRE AND SUPERNATURAL</p> <p>C.M. EDDY, JR.</p> <p>ISBN 9780970169907 \$14.95</p>
---	--	--

NEW COLLECTIONS FOR THE PRESENT

AVAILABLE WHEREVER BOOKS ARE SOLD

www.fenhampublishing.com

UNCLE ERIC'S LEATHER BOUND TALE

Catherine J. Gardner

Rule One in the Doggett household was “Don’t throw spitballs at Uncle Eric.” Billy’s mother had secured the list to the refrigerator door with a pineapple-shaped magnet. It ran straight through to Rule Seventeen: “Don’t talk to men wearing blue shoes.”

The list curled at the edges and was a crispy shade of yellow. Billy’s mother was afraid all the rules would be broken if she removed and rewrote it. Billy picked a squashed pea off Rule Five.

“Find something productive to do and stop lingering at the refrigerator door like a curdling pool of milk,” his mother said as she wiped flour off her nose. “Put some life in your cheeks by introducing them to some sunshine.”

The Doggett front yard was a long stretch of concrete. Weeds poked up through the cracks and in places had grown to monstrous heights. A collection of purple-haired grannies gathered at the bus stop. The bus doors hissed open and a man wearing shiny blue shoes stepped off. He looked at Billy and grinned.

Even without the added horror of his shoes, Billy would have turned and run at the grin. It was too white, too wide, and didn’t reach the man’s eyes.

The front door slammed behind him. He pounded up the stairs and then up a second set. The door into the attic trembled as he kicked it shut. Dust choked as he pulled an old trunk across the floorboards and positioned it in front of the door.

The doorbell rang.

“Don’t answer it. Don’t answer it. Don’t answer it.”

He pressed his hands to his ears. His knees made so much noise as they clicked together that he had no hope of remaining concealed. He lifted the lid of the trunk with the intention of climbing inside.

Someone sneezed.

Or rather, something within the trunk sneezed. He reached up and pulled the light switch cord.

Brown eyes blinked and a leather nose twitched. A disembodied voice said, “Who invited the broads?”

“What?” Billy said.

“The ringlets and Dorothy Gale dresses. Sheesh, did one of them just wink at me.”

Billy lifted the porcelain dolls out of the trunk to gain a better view of the squashed face. It had an Elvis-like quiff and buckteeth, and looked just like the portrait of dead Uncle Eric that hung above the fireplace.

He picked out a wad of pages that looked torn from a paperback book. The pages were dog-eared and damp.

“Hands off the goods, kid,” the face said.

“This?” Billy waved the musty paper.

“That is my only bargaining chip: The last chapter of *The Road to Hell* by Eric A. Doggett.”

Billy scratched his head. Was he really talking to a face in a trunk? The school psychologist who had counseled him after the incident involving the severed finger in his custard would have a long word to name this. He felt his head for bumps.

“Hand back the book and nobody gets hurt.”

A face in a trunk was threatening him. Uncle Eric was threatening him. Billy wished he had spit a decades worth of spitballs at the portrait.

“Everyone thinks you’re dead.”

As he looked down at the squashed face, Billy was not convinced his uncle wasn’t.

“Good. Now hand back the book.”

“A man wearing blue shoes just rang the doorbell.”

“Shut the lid.”

Uncle Eric closed his eyes and mouth. Billy blinked. Although wrinkled, the bottom of the trunk looked almost normal. Had he imagined the face? He left the lid open. The attic door whined as he opened it an inch. The trunk scratched along the floorboards.

“I’m afraid I can’t speak to you unless you take off your shoes.” His mother’s voice was a high-pitched squeak.

“My feet smell,” a gruff voice answered.

“Then good day and goodbye. Ahem! Could you please take your shiny shoe out of my door?”

“No.”

Billy’s mother always folded in the face of confrontation. Her usual

staple was to point people to the rules of her list. She invited the man into the kitchen to read it.

The front door slammed shut.

"Do you like your mother?" Uncle Eric's face asked.

"Of course."

"That's a shame."

"Why?" Billy looked into the trunk.

"Because she's about to be blended, whisked, or cooked in the oven, and I doubt there'll be anything left of her face to converse with."

In his rush to save his mother, Billy tripped down the stairs. He fell with a thump. His horrified face reflected back at him in patent leather. The foot tapped.

"This nice gentleman is inquiring after your Uncle Eric," his mother said.

"He's wearing blue shoes."

"Oh that was a silly rule." She giggled. "I've crossed it off the list."

Two red circles colored her cheeks. It looked as if the man had pinched them.

"I am searching for the last chapter of a book written by your talented uncle," the man hissed. "I will check your attic."

"No need to. I already have."

"My son is a genius."

Billy held open the front door. He waited and he waited and tried to ignore the bees that buzzed in his stomach. Eventually the man turned on his shiny heels and left. Well, sort of. He got as far as the bus stop, leaned against the pole, and looked as if he intended to go no further. His teeth blinded passing pedestrians and encouraged them to catch the bus. Confused faces peered from the bus windows as it rolled away. Billy bit his lip and suspected a case of hypnotism.

Moans issued from within the trunk as he dragged it down the stairs.

"What are you doing?" His mother asked.

Billy threw open the lid. "It's Uncle Eric."

"Hi," his uncle said.

His mother screamed and fainted. An insistent hand rapped at the front door. Billy tucked the chapter into his jeans pocket and pulled his t-shirt down to conceal it. He didn't want to answer the door but he knew that not answering it would look suspicious.

The man pushed Billy over.

"A-ha!" the man said as he tripped over the trunk.

"Uh-oh!" Uncle Eric replied. Then sticking out his leather chin and gaining in bravado he added, "What are you going to do, melt me again? Besides, the kid has the chapter."

Billy was out of the door and had fought through weeds before the man could blink. He hurtled over the fence. His arms pumped air and his legs had no idea where they were carrying him. He checked over his shoulder. Long strides propelled the man closer and closer.

The shopping centre with its maze of stores and CCTV opened up in front of Billy. It seemed everyone was pushing against him. He dived into a Postman Pat van, squished into the small space, and felt a total dipstick. If anyone from school saw him, he would spend the rest of the year having his head flushed down the toilet.

If he had a head to flush.

He unfurled the pages. The first page concentrated on fire and blood. The second was rather more gruesome. It was the tale of a man whose weapon was a hot poker and it described how he liked to insert things in dark places. Billy shuddered and shuffled on the tiny seat.

The end of a yellow umbrella poked him in the cheek. A bead of blood dripped onto his jeans.

"Out." The assailant insisted. "Out, out, out."

He squeezed out of the van with a pop. The woman who had attacked him shoved a bawling four-year-old into it. The van started rocking. The kid, however, did not stop bawling. The man and his shiny blue shoes waited for him. The man crooked his finger.

There was nowhere to run.

Billy dug into his pocket and pulled out the chapter. Greedy fingers snatched it from his hand. However, the man was not done with him. He grabbed Billy's left ear and dragged him through the crowd.

No one complained.

No one interfered.

Everyone stepped out of the way.

Maybe the shoppers also had a rule that instructed them not to talk to men wearing blue shoes. Or one that told them to ignore boys with ginger hair as they were usually up to something bad. He had erased that rule from his mother's list.

The last place he expected the man to drag him to was the church. The second last place was the choir loft. Billy considered whether he would go splat if the man threw him over the railings. This was after all a church and a supposed place of miracles. Sweat made his skin slippery. The man wiped his hands down his suit in disgust.

Billy cowered against a stack of hymnbooks. Below them sounds echoed as something scraped across the mosaic floor. Heels click-clacked.

"Careful, woman," Uncle Eric's voice echoed up the stairs as the trunk slammed against each step. "I am this trunk. This trunk is me."

"And my blood must be 100% proof because none of this can be happening," his mother muttered. She dropped the trunk with a thud and rushed over to Billy. Whisky dripped from her hair and blew from her mouth in intoxicating clouds. "Are you okay?"

"Prop me up, prop me up," Uncle Eric insisted.

Billy gave a sly kick to the rear of the trunk.

"Okay, you have the chapter, Bozo," Uncle Eric said.

"Boozon." The man corrected. "The address is in this chapter?"

"Yada, yada."

"Do you want me to melt your family? Do you want me to stuff them in the trunk with you?"

"It will make it a little crowded. However, I could do with the company." Uncle Eric's melted lips grinned.

"Can I spit at him now?" Billy asked.

"Yes," his mother answered.

"Sheesh, some days I cannot believe I wrote a book detailing how to melt a man into a trunk."

The man thumbed through the pages. Uncle Eric whistled as he did so.

"I cannot find the address."

"Page 274, line 6."

The man ran his finger down the page. He read aloud. "Inside my brain..."

"That's the address of where the information is stored, sucker."

"I'm going to kill you."

"Melted guy in a trunk. Don't exactly give a crap."

"There has to be something I can threaten you with." The man's smile hypnotized.

"Well not threaten so much but I could be bribed. A collection of graphic novels, a few paperbacks and a torch should do it. It's boring reading the same pages over and over and especially so when you haven't a pen to change their order."

"Or I could put a ferret in there with you? Or how about I drop in a few bookworms?"

"Not bookworms, I beg you."

"A bookworm to eat the bookworm. Maybe I'll turn the boy into one."

"Okay, I'll tell you. However, my throat is a little dry so you will have to lean in close. That's it."

Billy and his mother pushed the man into the trunk. They slammed the lid shut and then sat on it. The blue shoes had slipped off in the attack.

Billy's mother looked down at her reflection and screeched. "I'm creating a new rule. Never leave home without checking a mirror first."

"How long do you think it takes a man to melt into a trunk?" Billy asked.

"Well, your Uncle Eric disappeared when you were two," she counted on her fingers, "so I'm guessing we should leave it at least eleven years before we open it." ●



SOME NUTCASE

John Jasper Owens

She spent all day at the planetarium, watching the same show over and over under the artificial bowl of the Milky Way. The crowds changed—school kids, tourists, B&Ters—no real New Yorkers because they only came when the show was new, and this one had run for weeks. She left her seat only to pay for the next show, then settled back quickly to take another virtual trip on Voyager: slingshot around the sun, brush by Mars, and wait for the ceiling to fill with the trippy moons and rings of Jupiter and Saturn. It never got old.

Enjoy, buy another ticket, enjoy again.

She stepped out from the artificial night into the artificial day of Manhattan after dark. Headlights bled along the avenue, taxis bumped honks, and the streetlamps dampened the stars above to invisibility. Across the avenue stood the long wrought-iron gates, and beyond that Central Park stretched like a darkening secret. Some Puerto Rican kids ganged around one of the entrances, laughing and playing some sort of game that meant keeping sticks bouncing in the air. She wondered if it was a Puerto Rican thing or if all the kids were doing it, then thought, damn. I'm ancient.

Dinner soon, but a walk first.

She'd crossed the street and was maybe a dozen steps beyond the kids when she felt the man come up beside her. Amazing, a city this size and people all around, she could tell just before it happened that someone was coming for her. Her hand made a fist in her pocket.

"Did you enjoy the show?" he asked. She looked up at him—big guy—and thought, Great, some nutcase. City's chock-a-block with them: A wide and slumpy man with a mistake for a haircut and a roll of fat snuggling his belt. A billowy tee shirt with a picture of the galaxy stretched across his chest with words reading "You Are Here." A clunky, hippie-style wooden cross dangled from a thong on his neck. His clothes needed a bath. "I only ask," he said when she started walking faster, "because you sat through it thrice." He held up three

greasy fingers. "I sat through it twice, and you were already there when I arrived."

Thrice? Jesus.

"Of course, I'm not extrapolating," he snorted laughter. "But you could tell that. Maybe you were there longer."

She stopped walking, and he nearly stumbled past her. They were a few dozen yards beyond where the tourists would be taking carriage rides if it were earlier, snapping photos to take home to Omaha, and there were still plenty of people around. Two rollerbladers came up on them, parted on either side, and slid away. He was definitely a man to set off any normal woman's alarms. The size of him—despite his pudgy he was surely very strong, his face, sweaty and twitchy, and she saw he carried a large leather satchel over one shoulder. Big enough for...

But she didn't like that thought. She did not like that at all.

"You *know*," he breathed down at her.

She almost ran.

She took a deep breath and considered. Mace in her purse, lots of people around, even here in the park, and lit under the walkway lamps. Instead of causing a scene, she turned on her heel and marched away. He strode to keep up, breathing hard, and stayed beside her. "I've seen you before," he said. "I've seen the way you watch the stars. Take me!"

Screw it, she thought, and took off running. His heavy feet slapped after her. Wrong time to be wearing heels, she thought, can't stop to kick them off. The strollers, fewer here, watched them pass, not wanting to get involved. She didn't see a single cell phone come out. The city, lovely place for minding its own business. She needed to speed up, to... Wait. She had an idea.

She ducked off the path, and over a low hill. A copse stood near a duck pond close by, she remembered, a jogging trail snaking around it. "Stop," he shouted, and he was much closer than she'd thought. He could almost reach out and grab her hair.

No one around now, deep in the park at night.

She stopped.

She bent at her left knee and with a fluid sweep of her arm caught the huge man in his armpit and tossed him past her, his momentum carrying his three hundred pounds tumbling into a cedar trunk. His satchel split and reams of papers, notebooks, and binders flew like doves around them. Not the weapons she expected. As the man held his head and groaned, sprawled in the grass, she picked one up. Then another. She laughed. Then another and she positively howled. "*Area*

51 *Explained!* "Roswell: The Cover-up," "The Aztec UFOs."

"You're just some nutcase," she laughed, "I thought you'd come to kill me."

"You know," the man insisted, sitting up. "I've seen you. At night, staring at the sky, in the planetarium all day, watching the stars, you know what's out there! Tell me!"

"I thought you were a hunter," she said, shaking her head. "A dangerous man. But you're not." She knelt on one knee and stared into his eyes. "You're not dangerous, but you are lucky. Too many people saw us together."

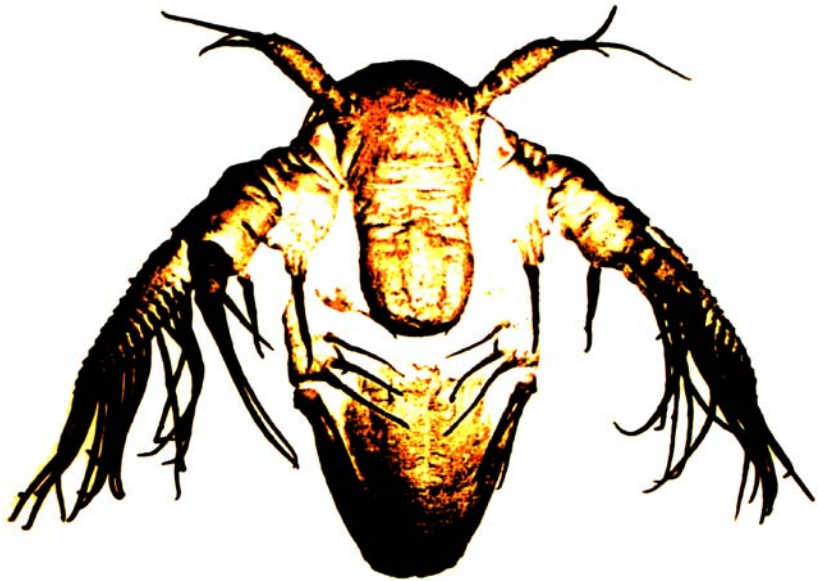
"But," he said, "the planetarium ..."

"You think I spent all day in the planetarium because I believe in UFOs?"

She brought one long fingernail to the side of her mouth, beneath her upper lip, and pushed up. Her incisor gleamed. Too long, too sharp, it seemed to grow. She smiled, two white fangs hooking down.

She winked at him.

She turned into a bat and flew away. ●



DROWN

K.S. Conlon

I never learned to swim.
I could never hold my face under the water
for fear of seeing that other world.

The seas always haunted me,
as the flow and ebb of waves
whispered dark lullabies
from a childhood aeons ago.

I hated the twisted reflections
upon the ocean's surface,
which confronted me with monsters in my own image.

I dreaded the suggestions of writhing tentacles
in the inky, endless depths,
as the glints of sun tried to penetrate
the secrets of the sea.

I never learned to swim.
I could never understand the urge
to return to the water's edge.

Our gills have been shed.
We left the memories of our origins hidden deep
in our own subconscious seas.

I don't want to dive in
and face the horror,
the truth.

I am happier to drown—
to have the water push into my lungs
and flood them with the taste of death
than to discover that I belong
in that terrible long-forgotten kingdom. ●

THE KEY RING

Garrett Calcaterra

I.

Never throw away a key. That's a habit I picked up from Uncle Ormund. It's some twenty years since I last saw him and I've still got two key rings: the everyday one for my house and car keys, and the big one—the kind you see janitors toting around—with close to a hundred keys on it. Some I still use occasionally. A few others I still remember what they once unlocked. The rest are lost in the dusty, cobweb-filled vaults of my memory. Of the ones I remember, there's the set to our San Francisco condo we rent out and the storage space we still have there in the City; the ones from Erica's old apartment, and mine; the spare to my wheelie-happy, three cylinder Kawasaki she made me sell after I ran it through a stop sign post and fractured the ulna in my right arm; the padlock key I stole to the cafeteria ice-cream freezer at Stoneridge Academy; and probably a dozen ancient-looking warded keys from the Hearne estate.

In the dream I had last week, I was trying to find this key ring.

Grams was lying on the bed, beckoning me closer for a kiss. There were mealworms in her mouth and eyes, and skin was tightening in from the walls and ceiling all around me. I tried running, but my legs were mired in that invisible bog that always slows you to near paralysis in dreams. I was slipping downward towards Grams' maw, a gaping pit of chains, shit, and blood. I grasped out for anything to hold on to and found a doorknob. Summoning some unfound strength, I pulled myself through the doorway and slammed the door shut behind me. The shadows from Gram's tentacles projected beneath the door. I ran to my desk and fumbled through the drawers.

You can't leave her locked in there forever, Uncle Ormund suddenly says to me, but then he turns to dust.

I finally find the key ring and turn to face the doorway... and that's when I woke up.

"You didn't hear a word I just said, did you, Dedrick?" my wife asked me.

I was standing in my study—my real study—between my drafting table and desk, only in my underwear, with the big key ring in hand. Erica was standing at the doorway where she must've just flipped on the lights. It'd been years since she last found me sleepwalking. It'd been years since I had a dream I remembered. I don't know what she made of it. All she said was, "I'm going back to bed." Me? I knew something was wrong.

In the morning I got the call from the Lake County coroner's office saying that Uncle Ormund had died of heart failure.

II.

I tried calling my mother in Ashland, but when some old hippy finally answered the phone after twenty minutes he told me she had left the commune four or five months ago. He had no idea where she'd gone or how I could contact her, so I left a message for her in case she turned up and left it at that.

The president of my firm complained when I told him I needed a week off, but I had loads of personal time accrued and I was ahead of schedule with the residential drawings I was working on, so I really didn't give him a choice in the matter. I dropped the drawings off at our Vegas office building on my way to the airport and was on my way to California before noon. The plan was for Erica to meet me there once I arranged the funeral and saw to Uncle Ormund's will.

And so I met with the Hearne family lawyer all by myself. The will was all in order. As I expected, the entire estate was left to me. Uncle Ormund was a man of propriety and I carried his surname, even if I only bore the Hearne name because I didn't know who my father was. Uncle Ormund certainly wasn't going to leave the estate to my mother, and there was no one else but me.

In the envelope the lawyer gave me with the insurance paperwork was the deed to the entire Hearne estate, and a single warded key—similar to those on my key ring, but smaller. I had no idea what it could be for, but I had little time to give it thought at that moment and merely placed it on my big key ring for safekeeping.

Uncle Ormund had prearranged to be buried next to Grams and Grandpa Hearne. The plot, casket, even the small service, were already paid for. It was a simple matter of arranging a date for the service with

the funeral director. We opted to wait for the weekend, that way Erica could make it and some distant cousins who lived back east. None of them showed. The cousins were too old to travel, Erica missed her flight—on purpose, I’m fairly certain. She’d never even met Uncle Ormund, yet she hated him.

When I met Erica at Berkeley, I thought I had put my childhood behind me, but I was still pretty messed up, I guess. She was the first girl I ever had a serious relationship with, the first girl I slept with, and there’s always going to be some baggage that’s dug up with your first girl, no matter how much therapy and counseling you had at boarding school. I didn’t know my mother as a kid. The only females I knew were Grams and Penny, and the head-doctors had pretty much wiped their memory clean from my mind.

I first started having the dreams when Erica and I began dating.

Pretty Penny falling into the pit of Grams’ gaping maw, and me pissing myself and running away. Abandoning Penny. Every time.

Erica found me sleepwalking, looking for my key ring a couple of times, and I must’ve said Penny’s name in my sleep more than once. Erica’s always been smart. Resourceful. She dug up a bunch of old newspaper articles on microfiche at the school library and found out how my grams had died a raving lunatic, chained to the wall in the basement of the Hearne manor, and how Uncle Ormund had been the primary suspect in Penny’s disappearance even though the police had no evidence to press charges.

Erica made me rehash all that old, painful shit I’d gone through with the counselors. But she at least comforted me. I cried like a baby with her. She cried with me and held me when I didn’t want to talk anymore. I told her what little I remembered of Grams and Penny. I even tried to dig up the repressed memories I don’t have of Uncle Ormund beating me.

Fact of the matter is, Uncle Ormund never did abuse me. He was strict. He took the belt to me a couple of times when I broke the rules. But for the most part he tried to be fatherly. He was like what I imagine Grandpa Hearne was probably like. He taught me humility, respect. He taught me to drive tractors, how to split wood, how to throw a baseball, how to judge when the wine grapes were ready for picking, all the stuff he thought a man needed to know. There wasn’t a lot of love between us, but he showed affection in his own way. The business about him chaining Grams to the wall—the stuff that really rankled Erica—I didn’t remember too well, nor did I blame Uncle Ormund at

the time. The only memories I had of Grams were a few faded pictures in my mind of me sitting beside her on her big, quilt-covered bed when I was very young.

And as for Penny, I’d spent a lot time and effort repressing those memories.

III.

Uncle Ormund’s funeral was small and attended by only a dozen or so people, most of them from Uncle Ormund’s church. It rained, that steady saturating downpour style of rain I’ve only seen in northern California. I hadn’t been back to Lake County in almost twenty years so I didn’t know most of the people who showed up beneath black umbrellas, but I did recognize one woman. When the service was over, she came up to me.

Penny’s mother. She gave me her condolences, said she remembered me when I was twelve, that I had grown up a handsome young man. I asked her if she still lived in the little farmhouse opposite Clover Springs Road from the Hearne estate and she said yeah. I said it was good to see her again. That’s all. What else could I say? I stood there like an idiot in the rain.

When she was gone and the casket was lowered into the ground I went to my car and called Erica.

“But the funeral is over,” she said. “You still want me to come?”

I was angry. Not because I felt I needed her there, but because she should have been there, that she was obliged to be there for me. Selfish. Stupid. I know. I don’t know when we went wrong. I always loved her.

“Just catch the next standby flight,” I told her. “Rent a car and meet me at the manor. I want you to be here with me.”

“But we’re just going to sell it.”

Her presumptuousness pissed me off even more. True, I was planning on selling the manor and the orchards and everything, but her saying that made me want to keep it just to spite her.

“I haven’t decided yet. Just get out here.”

“Fine.”

And that’s how we left it: her sitting at the airport in Las Vegas and me in my rental car at the cemetery, listening to the rain pummel the windshield.

IV.

The Hearne manor is located about ten miles southwest of Lakeport. Back in its heyday, when Grandpa Hearne was alive and running things, and Great-Grandpa Hearne before him, there were some thirty acres of temperamental Sangiovese and Petite Sirah grape orchards. The grapes are all gone wild—gone to hell—now. After I was born and Grams went mad, Uncle Ormund had to let it all go. He could've hired a nanny for me and a caretaker for Grams, but I think he was too proud to let anyone see us, know about us. The Hearne name used to mean something.

The house itself... I really hadn't expected to be awed by it. I've traveled all over the world researching architecture, I've designed ten-thousand square foot post-modern mansions, thirty story neo-gothic high-rises, but there's something about a lone Victorian style manse surrounded only by verdant hills of wild grasses, White Oaks, Ponderosa Pines, and rampant grape vines.

The Hearne house is two stories tall, with a gable-windowed attic and a cellar. Six bedrooms, maybe four thousand square feet of living space. A pitted marble exterior stairway leads to the covered, six-pillared front porch and oaken double doors. The horizontal wood siding is cream colored and the almost excessive trim, forest green. The pitched portion of the roof is shingled gray. Always has been.

After I parked my car in the muddy driveway, I just sat there staring at the house for maybe ten minutes before getting out. It'd been a long time since I'd seen the place. It was sort of like sitting in one of my dreams. The rain had stopped, so I tossed my sodden suit coat back into the car and discarded my tie along with it. I thought about changing out of the rest of my clothes, but my shoes and pant legs were already covered in mud from the cemetery. I grabbed my big key ring, clipped it to one of the belt loops on my black slacks, and trudged to the front steps.

Up close I found that Uncle Ormund had let the place get pretty bad. A rusted garden hoe lay in a patch of barren mud at the foot of the steps. The paint on the siding of the house was alligatored and peeling. Some of the panels along the underside of the porch were bowed. And one of the downspout drains from the second floor balcony above the porch had rusted away and caused the surrounding woodwork to decay; it looked like rats or pigeons had taken up residence in the rotting orifice. The front doors and the lock, at least, were in good

order; the biggest of the warded keys on my ring turned smoothly in the well-oiled locking mechanism and the doors opened without a squeak. The interior wasn't in any better shape than the exterior. The wood floors in the foyer were cupped and the lacquer blistered from water damage. The railing leading up the wide-arc staircase to the second floor dangled from the wall. The white crown molding above the doorway was stained brown and warped away from the ceiling and wall, probably due to the ruined downspout on the second floor. Dust was everywhere.

There were sheets on the furniture in the great room; I doubt anyone had gone in there since my twelfth birthday, when Penny was the only one to show up to my party and we took turns busting up the paper-maché piñata Uncle Ormund had made for us, then ate pixie sticks and gummi-fish on the great room floor until we were both sick. I remember being mortified at the idea of having a piñata at my twelfth birthday, thinking I was too old for such nonsense, but Penny didn't think it was stupid. She never said a peep about no one else showing up to my party either.

As I surveyed the rest of the first floor, I found more of the same: furniture covered with dusty sheets in the dining room, family room, and study. The only room on the first floor that looked to have been used in the last twenty years was the kitchen, and it reeked. A sink full of dirty dishes. A garbage can full of rotting trash. A layer of filth on all the oak cabinets and countertops. I threw the garbage out onto the side porch and left the door open so the place could air out. I pulled the drain plug from the sink, but the feculent water didn't go down until I reset the fuse-switch on the garbage disposal and ran it for thirty seconds. There were no kitchen towels, so I used my pants to dry my hands.

The last room on the first floor was Grams' room, located behind the breakfast nook. The door was closed. I didn't try it, but instead went upstairs and found more closed doors—all of them except Uncle Ormund's: the master bedroom. He'd been living in filth. The floor was littered with empty aspirin bottles, old newspapers, and crusty TV dinner boxes. The old king-sized, canopied family bed I remembered was gone, and in its place one of those motorized adjustable beds. A cordless telephone sat on the nightstand, and a flat-panel television—looking oddly out of place—hung on the wall.

That's how Uncle Ormund spent his last years: propped up in bed, watching TV. At least he had the phone nearby and was able to call

911 when he realized he was having a heart attack. God knows how long he would have lain there rotting before someone found him otherwise.

I opened a window in the room to let the place breathe, thinking about what a chore it was going to be to clean everything up, and at the same time realizing that I should've been feeling guilty. I didn't, though. Uncle Ormund was his own man, never wanted any help. I remember after grad school when I was working for Malstern Designs and making good money for the first time. I was newly engaged to Erica and got the notion to bring her to the Hearne estate, see if I could help Uncle Ormund re-invest in the property and get the vineyards going again.

"What for?" he asked me.

What for? That was the last time I talked to him. We've sent Christmas cards every year since, but that's it.

I kicked my way through the garbage toward the master bathroom entrance, but the stench kept me at bay. I could see from the doorway that the toilet was clogged and so turned back. Filthy clothes lay heaped in a pile near the closet doorway and shoeboxes full of junk were spilled over inside the closet. I started to move on, but glimpsed something beneath the boxes that caught my attention: a small wooden trunk. It wasn't spilled open, but it was overturned, having toppled from a shelf along with all the shoeboxes. I picked it up and saw the tiny keyhole in the latch. A tiny keyhole you open with a warded key.

I knew before I even grabbed the key ring from my belt that the key Uncle Ormund had left me would fit.

I'm not sure what I expected to find. I stood holding the box for a long time before finally taking it out into the light of the room and setting it down on the bed. The key fit perfectly, but unlike the front door, the hinges on the box squeaked with protest when I opened the lid. Inside was a stack of envelopes, old and yellowed. I was disappointed at first, not sure what to make of it all. I flipped through the ones on top, saw they were addressed to Uncle Ormund. No return address. Unopened. Farther down I started finding ones addressed to Grams. And me. I stared at the handwriting, feeling I should recognize it.

I held up one of the envelopes, staring at my name, and that's when I heard the footsteps, when I turned to see her—the last person I ever expected to see again—peeking through the doorway. I froze, thinking I was hallucinating, dreaming maybe, but then she turned and

scampered away. It was real; I heard her shoes clack across the wood floor. Without hesitation, I scrambled up and bolted after her, overcome with a sense of dread that I would lose her like I always did in my dreams.

V.

Of all the places I didn't want her to go, that's the place she went, where I knew she would go: Grams' room. I reached the bottom of the stairs and turned the corner into the kitchen at the same moment she slammed the door closed. I followed closely after and threw the door open only to see her head disappear into the floor and the cellar-door fall back to the ground with a brittle crack. There was no furniture in the room anymore, but I hardly noticed. I threw the cellar door open, expecting the opening to turn into a fang-filled mouth, expecting to be overcome with a gust of decay. All I smelled was dust, though. All I saw were bone-white stairs receding into darkness. I called her name out once, twice, but heard nothing. I took a step downward. Then another. And another. And then the stairs cracked beneath my feet and I was falling. I thrust my hands outward to break my fall, but I didn't hit the cellar floor. I just kept falling. And falling. And falling. Everything went black and I kept falling.

VI.

I awoke face down on a cool wood floor. My nose was bleeding, my head throbbing, but otherwise I seemed to have all my faculties. The memory of the basement stairs shattering and me falling came rushing back and I felt a flood of relief at not having broken any bones, but then I remembered why I had been running down the stairs in the first place. *Penny*.

I flipped over on the floor and there she was, sitting cross-legged at my feet, looking exactly as I remembered her: still twelve years old, with those big blue eyes and straight brown hair, but wearing a girly pink dress like she never would have worn.

"What happened to you, Dedrick?" she asked me. "You got big. And old."

I didn't trust myself to speak, thinking I was dreaming or hallucinating. I pulled myself up onto my knees and reached out to touch Penny's arm, expecting her to dissipate away like a plume of smoke,

but she was solid flesh and blood.

"You're still a scaredy-cat," she said. "You don't need to be afraid of me."

I was speechless. I sat there with my hand on her arm for a moment longer before finally forcing myself to tear my eyes away from her and survey my surroundings

"Where the hell are we?" I gasped, but I already knew. I was still in the Hearne house, in the middle of the foyer, but it wasn't right. The chandelier glowed warmly overhead, all the dust was gone, the hardwood floors were smooth and polished, the crown molding perfect, and the banister on the stairway wasn't ripped out of the wall.

"I live in your house now," Penny said. "With Mother."

"Mother?" The word sent a chill running down my spine.

"She's not really my mother, but she likes me to call her that. She calls me Terra sometimes, but I'm not the real Terra."

I jumped to my feet, on the verge of panic now. Terra is my mother's name.

"Your name isn't Terra," I told Penny. "It's Penny."

She rolled her eyes. "I know—that's what I just said. Why are you so scared?"

"Penny, how did you get here?"

"What do you mean?"

The image of Grams' gaping maw and tentacles tugged at the edge of my mind. "Do you remember the day you disappeared?" I asked her.

She jutted her jaw to the side and raised an eyebrow—I remembered the look.

"We were playing hide and go seek..." I explained, but that's all I could really remember. The last memory I had of Penny was her running out of the great room as I started counting to twenty. Everything else... I thought just nightmare visions... all the other memories had been explained away by so many doctors.

"I remember playing," Penny said. "But you never came and found me."

"Did Grams find you?"

"Mother."

"She's not your mother. Did she do something to you? Did she take you?"

"She acts like a mother, and she likes me to call her that."

Clearly, she didn't want to talk about it. I didn't know that I really

wanted to either. "You talk to Grams?" I asked instead. "How?"

Penny wrinkled her face. "What do you mean? Just like we're talking right now."

"She's real? Can you see her?"

"Of course she's real, silly."

I couldn't get my mind around this. "But how? She's dead."

"She's real," Penny insisted. "You'll see. She wants to talk to you. She's waiting."

VII.

None of it seemed possible—this was the Hearne house, but it wasn't—here was Penny, but she was only twelve when she should have been almost forty. I couldn't make sense of it, but there it was, solid as could be, so I didn't argue. I let Penny lead me though the great room towards the back of the house, figuring I'd wake up or snap out of it when we reached Grams' room; that's always when I woke up in my dreams.

The sheets were gone from the furniture in all the rooms and everything was immaculate. The furniture and floors were polished. There wasn't a speck of dust anywhere. Through the window on the far side of the great room all I saw was black.

"Why did it take you so long to come and find me?" Penny asked. "I've been waiting forever."

Twenty some years, I thought. "When you disappeared," I said, "I was sent away by Uncle Ormund—"

Penny tensed. "Shhh. Don't say his name in front of Mother."

I nodded warily, and we continued through the breakfast nook.

"Be careful what you say," Penny went on. "I don't think she remembers you, so you'll have to remind her. She forgets things easily. She gets mad easily."

I stopped and grabbed Penny. We were right outside Grams' door. "Has she hurt you, Penny?"

"No, never. But she gets mad when she remembers things and she'll break stuff and mess up the house."

I didn't entirely believe her, but nodded anyway and let Penny knock on the door.

"Come in," a voice said, and Penny opened the door.

The room was as it looked in my earliest memories. Grams sat on her big, quilt-covered bed, knitting. She looked kindly. Her gray hair

was bundled into a bun at the back of her head. She looked over her reading glasses at me standing behind Penny in the doorway and suddenly the skin on her forehead and cheeks seemed to mottle and tear away—revealing black sinews like grease covered cables—but only for a moment and then her skin was back, and I wasn't entirely sure that I hadn't imagined it. My adrenaline was surging. I kept picturing that maw of chains, shit, and blood. I was sweating, shaking—too scared for this to be a dream.

"Who's this you've brought, Terra?" Grams asked.

Penny hesitated and looked up at me.

"It's me, your grandson," I croaked. "Dedrick."

Grams narrowed her eyes and cocked her head.

"You used to read me stories when I was a boy, here on this bed," I continued, my voice now under control. I stepped forward to get between Grams and Penny. "One time when I was sick and"—I caught myself about to say Uncle Ormund's name—"and I couldn't go to school, you let me take a nap with you. You kissed me on the head and told me I'd feel better when I woke up."

"Yes, yes I remember," Grams said, looking over me now with a smile. She looked at my wedding band. "You're a grown man. You're married."

"What?" Penny asked, but Grams hushed her.

"Do I have great-grandchildren?" Grams asked me.

"No. We tried, but—"

The bed seemed to waver suddenly, almost become translucent. Surprise flickered across Grams' face, but then the bed was back, solid, and she was staring at me again.

"It was wrong to bring him here, Terra," Grams said. "He doesn't belong. You'll have to show him out."

"No, please!" Penny rushed to the foot of the bed and got down on her knees to beg.

"She's not Terra," I told Grams, stepping forward. "She's not your daughter. Her name is Penny and she's going to leave with me."

VIII.

Erica and I tried having kids. After we finished grad school at Berkeley, we tried like hell. When nothing happened we both went to the doctor. I had strong enough swimmers, and there wasn't anything wrong with Erica; our DNA just wouldn't combine and stick. We tried

in vitro fertilization and for a while it seemed like it was going to happen—we moved out of our flat in the City and bought a huge house in a gated community on the outskirts of Vegas, where I took a new job with a bigger firm—but five and half months into it Erica miscarried. It was a mess. The doctors said she'd never be able to get pregnant again.

Erica always loved kids; she's brilliant, yet still decided to be a teacher for Christ's sake. Not being able to have kids is what ruined us.

Standing there in Grams' room with Penny, it wasn't lost on me that Penny was about the same age our child would have been. I got this crazy idea that I would take Penny home, that she would live with Erica and me, and everything would be alright again. I didn't think of Penny's own mother, I didn't think of Grams or what would happen when I took Penny away from whatever this place was. I just knew I wasn't going to leave Penny behind.

Grams laughed when I told her Penny was coming with me. Like she was laughing at a foolish child.

"Tell Dedrick goodbye, Terra, and show him the way out."

"She's not your daughter, you can't keep her," I insisted. "You're not even real. You're dead."

Grams' skin mottled away again and she rose beneath her covers.

"No!" Penny screamed, jumping up and away from the bed. I grabbed her hand and tugged her behind me.

"You will not take her away from me again!" Grams screamed. She was suddenly out from beneath the covers. Her fingers crinkled together as if in arthritic seizure, then melded together. New limbs sprouted beneath her paisley nightgown.

I spun to the door but it slammed itself closed and when I yanked at the doorknob the whole wall flexed and wavered inward like a flat panel of rubber. The door wouldn't open. It was as if it had fused with the wall itself. I turned back around to see Grams stalking towards me, hunched over, hands—no, tentacles—outstretched. Her eyes were mad. I could see rotting tendons where sections of her skin crumbled away like burnt paper.

"God damn you, Ormund," she hissed, "I'll not let you take her away from me again."

"Mother, please don't," Penny pleaded. She tried getting in Grams' way, but Grams shoved her aside and then had her bony hands wrapped around my neck, had me pinned back against the wall.

"I'll kill you, Ormund," she spat in my face. The stench of shit and rot bowled over me.

I'm not Ormund, I tried saying but it came out in an imperceptible wheeze. Her bony hands were cold, like steel cables constricting around my throat. I couldn't pull them away. I'm Dedrick, I tried telling her. Your grandson.

"Please, stop," Penny was crying over and over again.

I couldn't breathe. Spots riddled my vision. In a panicked fury I tried wrenching myself free, but Grams' grip only tightened.

My grandmother's ghost is killing me, was all I could think as everything turned to gray.

IX.

I awoke in a pink room. My head was sunk in a down pillow with pink ruffles around the edges, and a pink and purple paisley-flowered bedspread was pulled over me. Penny lay curled up at my side.

"Are you alive?" she whispered.

It occurred to me that I very likely wasn't alive. I knew Grams was dead, and it didn't make sense for Penny to still be twelve unless she had died when she was twelve. And here I was with them. What did that leave? The fall down the stairs into the cellar, I decided. I fell and broke my neck. Died instantly.

The thing was, my throat hurt from the strangling Grams gave me. I swallowed painfully. Could dead people be injured? Feel physical pain? And I could smell Penny's hair. It smelled like grass and spring flowers.

"I guess I'm alive," I decided. "What happened?"

"Mother tried to kill you, but I made her stop."

"She thought I was my uncle."

"I told you, she gets confused."

A mad woman in life, a mad woman in death, I thought. She thinks I'm Ormund, thinks Penny is my mother, Terra.

I propped myself up on my elbows and looked around the bedroom. "Where are we?"

"In my room," she said, sitting up and looking around. "I mean, Terra's room."

This was my mother's old room, I realized, but different. I threw the covers off and got to my feet. I had never been allowed to go into my mother's room as a kid, but Penny and I had snuck in a few times when Uncle Ormund was away or busy working outside. I remember it being simply furnished, with a single bed, nightstand, and dresser. It was the

smallest room in the house, square, with a walk-in closet. The layout of this room was exactly the same. It was all wrong, though. Interior shutters I never remembered were closed over the window and locked shut with a huge padlock. A shelf above the window was filled with teddy bears and stuffed unicorns and butterflies, but all their faces were demented—deformed with mismatched, misplaced buttons and stitching. A mural was on the wall above the bed, painted in pastel colors like a child's storybook illustration, but depicting a grisly scene with a girl gazing down from the top of a tower at a pile of decapitated, disemboweled men's corpses. The rest of the walls were wallpapered with pink flowers, the hardwood floor was bleached white, and the ceiling painted pink. Penny hated pink.

"Mother said you could stay here for awhile," Penny said. "But when she's done resting, you'll have to go."

It took me a moment to comprehend what she had said. "Wait, Grams sleeps?"

"No, she rests. It's hard for her to keep the house...clean. For some reason you made her more tired than usual."

"My neck must have worn her hands out," I remarked, realizing the opportunity afforded to us. "C'mon, we have to leave while she's sleeping."

Penny didn't move from the bed. "No. She'll know if I try to leave. She'll never let me go. Please, Dedrick, just stay here with me."

I didn't know what to say. I certainly had no intention of leaving Penny behind, but I wasn't about to stay in the house either. I had to get her out of there.

"You're sure Grams will wake up if we try to leave?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Will she try to stop us?"

"She'll stop us."

"Alright," I said, thinking about the choking I'd gotten. Grams had been reasonable enough before I told her I was taking Penny away, I realized. I was able to remind her who I was and she was rational. If I could prove to her that Penny wasn't my mother, there was a good chance she would let us both go. "Where are all the pictures?" I asked Penny.

"Pictures?"

"Yes, there were pictures—photographs—hanging on the walls when I was kid. If we can find one of my mom, I can convince Grams that you're not her and we can leave."

"There aren't any pictures on the walls," Penny said, shaking her head.

"They must be somewhere. Haven't you seen any pictures all these years?"

"No," said Penny, but with little conviction. It was evident she was trying to think of or remember something. "I... I haven't seen any pictures, but there are some places in the house I've never been too."

"Why?"

"Because they're locked."

"I have keys..." As soon as I said this, I realized that I actually didn't have the keys, that I hadn't seen them since my fall down the basement stairs. I had them with me when I chased after Penny, I was sure. "Shit, my key ring..."

Penny hopped out of the bed and smiled as she opened the top drawer of her nightstand. "These keys?"

I hugged her and took my key ring.

"They fell off your belt when you fell, so I grabbed them," she explained.

"Smart girl. Let's go find some photos."

"Anywhere but your uncle's room," she pleaded. "I promised Mother to never go in there. I'll take you to the other parts of the house, but..."

"Alright, what other parts of the house are locked?"

"The study, your room... and the attic."

I didn't know that I really wanted to see my room, and the attic was probably a dusty mess, so I led the way to the study.

X.

The first key I tried opened the door without so much as a click. Inside, the study looked much as I remembered it, at first. There was the huge fireplace with the soot-blackened brick mantle along the west wall. The entire north wall was covered with bookshelves. There was the big Persian carpet and the flattop oak desk in the middle of the room, and along the east wall a day bed. The burnished brass chandelier lit the room warmly.

There were no photographs on the walls like I remembered, though.

I went to the desk, hoping to find something in the drawers, but quickly found there were no drawers. The surface of the desk was smooth where the drawers should have been. There weren't even any

keyholes. I got on my knees and looked underneath the desk. No hardware, no hinges, sliders or even nails. It was as if the whole desk was made of a solid piece of wood. I checked where the legs met with the body of the desk, where the dovetail joints should have been, but there were no joints, just one continuous piece of wood with the grain curving impossibly from vertical to horizontal as it went from leg to desktop.

I stood up and turned to see Penny watching me from the daybed.

"There's nothing here," I told her. "Let's go."

"Not yet. I want you to read me a story."

I was impatient to move on and find a photograph of my mother before Grams awoke, but when I opened my mouth to tell Penny as much, the words stuck in my mouth. She was pouting her lips out at me, and her blue eyes were spread wide. She was using the same tactics she used when I was twelve to get her way. It had the same effect on me as an adult.

"Please?" she asked. "Mother reads me stories sometimes, but you..."

"Alright," I agreed without even a fight. "Something short, though."

She smiled and clapped her little hands together as I went to the bookshelves. I went to the section with all the stuff I liked as a kid: Grimm's fairy tales; the Burroughs' Tarzan and Mars books; the Jules Verne and Robert Louis Stevenson adventures; Asimov's space civilization novels. None of the books here had words on the spines, though. I gazed across the expanse of books and saw that none of them had titles. Frowning, I grabbed one and opened it. Despite the seeming antiquity of the binding, the pages were not yellowed with time. In plain type, the cover sheet read, *Rapunzel*, with no author by-line or any other publication information. On the next page, the type was much more garish and the border was decorated with leafy vines. The book was odd, but I gave it little thought at the moment and sat down on the daybed beside Penny. She nestled against me and I began reading.

"A long time ago there lived a man and a woman in a fair castle. One spring day they had a beautiful baby daughter and they were very proud and all the servants could not help but love the little princess. As she grew she became more beautiful and her voice that of an angel. Her beauty became renown throughout the kingdom and before long young men were paying call to woo the princess in marriage.

"The mother and father, being honorable parents, turned away the

would-be suitors. ‘Only a prince is fit for our daughter’s hand,’ said they.

“Along one day came a devious man, disguised as a servant so as to escape the eye of the vigilant parents. He began whispering lies into the princess’s ear. He spoke of love and far off lands, thinking he could steal her away in the night. The mother learned of his plan, however, and became wroth. With her kitchen knife she gelded him, then fed his tripe to the other suitors...”

I stopped, realizing this wasn’t the real *Rapunzel* I was reading, or anything even remotely close. I flipped to the next page and to my horror saw an illustration of a man being gelded. I slammed the book closed.

“What about the tower part?” Penny complained. “You can’t stop now.”

“The story is wrong,” I said, returning the book to the bookshelf and grabbing another. I opened the new book and saw it too was titled *Rapunzel*. The first illustration I flipped to was similar to the mural in Penny’s room—a princess in a tower with corpses lying on the ground below. I flipped through it further and saw that the story ended within the first ten pages and that the remainder of the book was filled with drawings of towers and dead suitors. I tossed the book to the ground and grabbed another. Same title, more gruesome pictures. The next book was the same. Cracked skulls. Viscera. Shit. Rent open testes. They were all the same.

I stopped on an illustration of a woman chained to the wall in a circular chamber. It was almost imperceptible at first, but the woman appeared to waiver, to move. I blinked my eyes and leaned in closer to see if I was imagining things and suddenly the woman’s mouth snapped out of the book at me, no longer a drawing but a miniature bear trap chained to the page. I jerked my face away and let out a cry as I slammed the book shut.

“What’s wrong?” Penny asked.

It took me a moment to catch my breath before I could respond. “Have you seen these books before? Did Grams read to you from them?”

Penny didn’t say anything, just looked confused. My heart still beating furiously, I grabbed her by the hand and pulled her out of the study.

XI.

Something looked different about the downstairs floor, as if it was constricting around us, the walls and ceiling convex or converging, but when I focused on any particular area, it looked perfectly normal. Still, after the books I was scared and not about to deem anything impossible. I led Penny up the stairs and to my room, hoping to find it in the same condition as when I was a kid. I remembered having a little photo album on my dresser with a picture of my mom holding me when I was a baby. Rationally, I should have looked there first, but I knew the room wouldn’t be what I expected.

I stopped at the door, breathing heavily, Penny holding one of my hands. With my free hand I grabbed my key ring and unlocked the door. Like with the library door there was no resistance. It opened and we stepped inside to a sewing room.

Penny was more surprised than me. “Hey, this isn’t your room.”

“Not yet,” I said. “It was a sewing room before I was born.”

“But I...” She stopped and looked at me, then down at the floor. It should have occurred to me then that she knew more than she was letting on, but I just thought her surprised like me.

I grabbed the pulley on the old manual-powered sewing machine and found that it wouldn’t move. I thought it was merely ceased up at first, but when I leaned closer I saw that the whole thing was one solid piece, just like the desk in the library. The whole house was filled with props I began to realize. I ushered Penny out of the room and closed the door behind us, knowing full well it was pointless to search the room for pictures.

We walked down the hallway toward the attic entrance, even though I was feeling less and less confident we were going to find photographs anywhere in the house.

“Mother never lets me go into the attic,” Penny said, a little edge in her voice. She was scared. I started to say something to comfort her, but without warning the floor gave out beneath my left foot.

Penny screamed as I lurched forward onto my elbows and free knee with a grunt. The sensation was too disorienting for me to scream. There had been no crack of the wood floorboards breaking, no sound at all. Instead, it was as if my foot had stepped through a soft membrane into—what?—nothingness, I guess—utter void, absolute coldness, an airless breeze. I could feel my pant-leg fluttering. The hairs on my calf stood on end.

With Penny’s frantic help I yanked my leg free and the floor closed up, once again solid. I pulled my pant leg up to check my leg, certain

it would be withered or frostbitten. It was fine, though. I looked at Penny and we both sat there for a moment, breathing heavily.

"That's never happened before," Penny said. I could definitely hear doubt in her voice now, and that rattled me even more.

Without so much as a word, I grabbed her hand and ran to the attic door, determined to get the hell out of the house as soon as possible.

Again, the first key I tried worked and the door opened without protest. Before us rose a steep staircase, amazingly free of dust and cobwebs. The few times I had dared peak into the attic as a kid, there had always been dust and cobwebs. I stepped through the threshold of the doorway and looked up the stairs; it was dim, but not utterly dark.

"Up we go," I said and went first.

Before we even reached the top of the staircase we started hearing noises: weird skitterings across the floorboards, muffled squeaks, and distant bells. I motioned for Penny to stop and peered up out of the stairwell; everything went silent. I walked the rest of the way up the stairs and looked about. The attic space was expansive, stretching out in all directions so much that the walls were lost in darkness. The only indication of a boundary at all was a series of countless windows, so far away they looked the size of matchbooks.

Immense as it was, the attic was packed with junk. Old furniture, chests, crates, cardboard boxes tied together with twine, and so many toys it was mind-boggling. Dolls, doll-houses, stuffed animals, wagons, tea-sets, blocks, rocking horses—you name it, it was there.

"It's alright," I said to Penny, in a whisper. She stepped up to my side and her eyes widened as she scanned the attic. "Let's start looking through the boxes first," I told her. "Let me know if you find any with photographs inside." She nodded, but said nothing as I started tearing open the closest box.

The twine broke away easily, but when I flipped open the flaps I found nothing inside but white, cotton stuffing. I grabbed another box; it was filled with the same. I moved to a different stack of boxes, and found more stuffing. Props, I realized, just like downstairs. Was nothing in this house real?

"C'mon," I said to Penny, heading for the stairwell.

"Wait, look."

I stopped and saw that she was holding a doll.

"We don't have time to play," I told her.

"I'm not playing, Dedrick. Just look, please."

I sighed, thinking she was just being silly, but went to look at the doll to appease her so we could get the hell out of there. When she held the porcelain-faced doll out to me, though, I recoiled back in horror. Like the dolls and stuffed animals in Penny's room, this doll's face was hideously deformed, but more shocking was that it was bleeding. Bleeding from between its legs onto its white dress and down its white cloth legs.

"Look under her dress," Penny said. She had tears in her eyes.

"Penny, no dammit!" I yelled, snatching the doll away from her and feeling blood squish out from the soft body onto my hand. In revulsion, I tossed the doll aside and its porcelain head shattered on the floor. On impact, the whole attic seemed to suck inward and I was overcome with vertigo. Penny staggered sideways into me and I almost lost my footing, but then everything reoriented and it was deathly still.

Something skittered across the floor in the distance. A second later something squeaked closer by.

"Let's go," Penny whispered.

I was of like mind and grabbed her hand to lead her down the stairs, but when we turned a huge wooden soldier stood blocking our way. It was nearly three feet tall, with a red-painted uniform, and a wooden rifle in its right hand. It hadn't been there before. I moved to step around it, but it thrust its rifle outward to bar our way and I froze. Its eyes were following me.

"Penny," I whispered, letting go her hand. "You go around it to the right and down the stairs. I'll keep its attention on me."

"I don't wanna leave you, Dedrick."

"Just go, Penny." I left nothing in my voice for her to protest to. She nodded and slowly moved to the right. I went to the left. The soldier's eyes stayed on the both of us—one watching her, one watching me—and it took a step backward to better guard the stairwell. I snapped my fingers to attract its attention, but the soldier's only response was to level its rifle towards me. At the same time, something moved behind me. I dared not take my eyes off the soldier or Penny, though. I stepped forward and the hammer clicked back on the soldier's rifle.

I stopped. Something squeaked off to my right. Something else rattled in the distance behind Penny. More noises closed in around us. I didn't know what the hell was going on, but I knew our opportunity was slipping away. Without another thought, I lunged at the soldier,

intent on kicking it back away from the stairwell. The rifle shot cracked out before I even got close. I toppled backward, whiteness filling my vision and my left ear ringing and burning. I heard Penny scream, as if off in the distance, and I struggled back to my feet, squeezing my eyes open and shut to try and regain my sight. I was overcome with a spell of dizziness and nausea. Something hit my leg—a metal wagon, I think—and I lost my balance to stagger sideways into a heap of boxes.

I lay there on the crumpled boxes in a daze for a moment, then something bit my arm. The new pain brought me back to my senses and I flung whatever it was on my arm away with a shout and jumped to my feet. Toys were everywhere. They were alive, and all mad as hell, swarming across the floor. Penny had a half dozen dolls clinging to her arms and hair. I was at her side in two strides and started yanking them off her. One of them bit at my finger as I pulled it away and with a curse I raised it above my head to dash it into the ground.

“No!” Penny screamed, but I was in a rage. I threw the doll to the floor and its head shattered.

Like when I’d thrown the bloody doll, the attic sucked inward. This time, all the toys around us screeched and went berserk. Still not realizing what I was doing, I tore the rest of the dolls from Penny and kicked away the stuffed animals at my feet. A rubber band helicopter buzzed by my ear and I swatted it away like a fly. I grabbed the little red wagon by the handle and flung it off into the distance. The toy soldier thrust its bayoneted rifle at me, but this time I was quicker. I grabbed the rifle and kicked the soldier in the head, like you’d kick open a door. Its head cracked and bent backward. I kicked it again, this time knocking the head clean off, and the floor buckled beneath our feet.

Penny screamed and we both fell to our hands and knees. I lunged sideways to grab her by the wrist and pulled her towards the stair rails, which I could see rising and falling in the distance like the forecandle of a ship on a stormy sea. I tried to stand and walk, but it was like trying to walk on a water mattress, so we crawled. Toys got in our way, but they were having more trouble than we were and their faces were contorted in pain. The headless, bloody doll staggered in front of us to bar our way, but when I brushed it aside, it fell over and began writhing as if it were having a seizure.

It seemed impossibly far to the stairs, but we trudged forward, and suddenly we were swept up with a swell of the floor and slid straight

down into the stairwell, only to tumble down the entire staircase and burst through the door at the bottom.

XII.

When we both regained our senses, the floor had quit buckling beneath us, but the house still groaned. I felt a rumbling in my tailbone and wrists as I pushed myself up into a sitting position. A sub-sonic rumbling filled the base of my skull.

“What is that?” I asked.

“Mother. We’ve hurt her.”

“How?”

“The house. It’s part of her.”

I think I must’ve been in shock because I didn’t comprehend what she was saying. My left ear was throbbing. I touched it, only to find my hand covered in blood. A small chunk of my earlobe was gone.

“Are you alright?” Penny asked, seeing the blood and using the folds of her pink dress to dab at my ear.

“You’re going to ruin your dress,” I said, somehow concerned about that of all things.

“I hate this dress.”

“I know,” I replied, lurching to my feet. “That’s why we need to get you out of here.”

“No.” She grabbed at my arm. “Please, just stay here with me. If we hide in my room, and you quit messing the house up, maybe mother will forget you’re here.”

The floor rocked beneath our feet and a deep groan rumbled somewhere far in the distance. Something plodded down the steps in the attic above us.

“I don’t think she’s going to forget,” I said. “We need to leave now.”

“Please, we’ll be safe in my room,” Penny pleaded.

All I could think about was the hideous stuffed animals and dolls in her room. There was no way in hell I was going in there.

“How do we get out of here, Penny?”

“There’s no way out.”

“What if we make a run for it, right out the front door? Will she be able to catch us?”

“No. We can’t go out the front door. It won’t open.”

“I have all the keys,” I reminded her.

"It's not real. There's not even a keyhole."

Another prop.

"How the hell do we get out of here, then?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said, lowering her eyes and fidgeting in closer to me to grab my hand. "Let's just go hide in my room."

There were more footsteps on the stairs above us. The polished wood floor trembled beneath our feet. It didn't occur to me that Penny might be lying. My thoughts went to the last place in the house that was locked, that she was forbidden from: Uncle Ormund's room. I wasn't hoping to find photographs of my mother anymore, but rather a way out of this house. I grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her down the hallway.

"Dedrick!" she cried when she realized where I was going. "No!"

I thrust a key into the keyhole of Uncle Ormund's door. "Stay by my side," I told Penny, then pushed open the door.

XIII.

All was silent in Uncle Ormund's bedroom. I closed the door behind us and locked it, thinking to keep away whatever was following us from the attic, be it demented toys or Grams. I was not prepared for what I saw when I turned around to face the room. Gone was the posturepedic bed Uncle Ormund died in. In its place was an old canopied bed and lying atop it, a monstrosity of a man—no, a nightmare beast—what Penny thought to be my uncle—deep in slumber. A country-flower bedspread covered most of its mountainous body, but its head and one arm protruded from beneath the covers. Its fist and knuckles were simian in nature, orange and bristling with black hair. Its head was bulbous —bald—with huge, fleshy mounds for eyebrows, deep-sunken eye sockets, a bovine nose, and a row of shark-like teeth protruding beneath thin, black lips. The creature snored, a bass-tone rasp.

Penny clutched her arms around my waist and tried pulling me back towards the door. I was stunned, paralyzed. Penny fumbled for my key ring and at first I grabbed at it too, thinking to flee. I caught myself, though, and took a deep breath. This was the master bedroom, I reminded myself. This had to be the way to get out. Why else would there be a hideous beast here to guard it?

I motioned for Penny to stay put and be quiet, then turned to survey the room. Although the posturepedic bed, flat-panel television,

and piles of garbage were gone, the room still had the same layout as I remembered. I stepped silently to one of the blackened windows first, thinking to open it and climb out. The window was solid, though—a fucking prop, just like everything else in the house. I glanced to make sure the beast was still sound asleep, then scanned the ceiling, hoping to find some sort of panel or entrance leading upward, and outward. There was nothing.

I made for the bathroom, stepping silently—heel-to-toe, heel-to-toe. The beast in the bed didn't stir.

The bathroom wasn't how I remembered it, but it was a normal looking, early 20th century bathroom: porcelain tub, freestanding sink, and mirrored vanity cabinet. The blackened window was as fake as the ones in the main room.

I stepped back out into the bedroom, knowing full well there was only one more place to look. Penny was still standing petrified by the door. The beast still lay snoring on the bed. I stepped towards the closet and opened the door. The closet was filled with clothes: men's work clothes and suits on the right side, women's dresses and gowns on the left. I reached outward and ran my hands over the back wall, hoping to find a way out—a doorway, the seam to a secret compartment, anything. The wall was smooth. I pushed aside the clothes to search both sidewalls. Nothing. There was no way out. At least not here in Uncle Ormund's room.

In defeat, I let my hands drop to my side. My right hand slapped the key ring hanging at my belt, and I suddenly remembered the chest I'd found earlier in the closet, the one with all the letters. My heart thumped in my chest. It only made sense. Uncle Ormund had left me the key to the chest with his will. It had to be the way out.

I spun around, looking on the shelves above the clothes racks for the chest, but saw nothing but boxes and folded linens. The ceiling was taller than it should have been, and the stacks of boxes went higher than I could see. I reached up and grabbed the bottom of the shelf on the right and tested it. It seemed solid enough, so I started to pull myself up, thinking to climb onto the shelf to better see all the boxes. I got one leg up onto the shelf, then an elbow. I grunted and shifted my weight to roll up onto the shelf and that's when it broke.

The noise of boxes and clothes falling was deafening. I hit the floor with a thud and covered my head as more and more boxes and suits and coveralls fell atop me. When at last everything went still, I held my breath and listened. All was silent.

I pushed aside the junk on top of me as quietly as I could and sat up to peer out the closet. All was still silent, but the beast on the bed was gone.

“Penny?” I whispered. There was no response, so I repeated her name in a hiss. “Penny?” Something big shuffled across the floor outside the closet. “Penny!” This time I yelled out her name and stumbled out of the closet, only to find myself standing face to face with the beast. I back stepped, looking frantically about for Penny, but she was gone.

The beast lumbered towards me, its right arm dragging on the ground, its left one withered and curled up along its side. In terror, I stumbled into the closet accidentally and grabbed the first thing I could find to protect myself: the fallen closet hanger rod. The beast filled the doorway.

“Uncle Ormund! It’s me. Dedrick. It’s okay.”

The beast responded with a rumbling growl and knocked the closet doorframe away with its good arm. I screamed and thrust out the hanger rod to keep the monster at bay. It snorted when I hit it in the chest and swiped the rod away. I staggered to the side, but managed to prod it back one more time. When I thrust at it a third time, the beast was ready. It snatched the rod from my hands and smashed it against the closet wall with a roar.

“Uncle Ormund! No!”

It lunged at me and I fell back to stay out of its grasp. I grabbed whatever I could get my hands on—boxes, hangers, clothes—to throw in the direction of the monster, but it wasn’t fazed. It reached out with its good arm and grabbed me by the throat.

“Ormund,” I squeaked as it lifted me up into the air. I knew it couldn’t really be my uncle, but still I tried. “Ormund!”

The ape-like hand constricted around my throat. I gripped its fingers, tried to pull them away with all my strength, but it was pointless. I craned my neck sideways and managed to get a fold of hand-flesh into my mouth. I bit down as hard as I could and felt the flesh give way beneath my teeth. Instead of blood, my mouth filled with hot, bile tasting liquid. The monster roared out in pain and threw me into the wall. I was stunned, half-vomiting, but knew this was my only chance for escape, so forced myself to roll towards the door, hoping to pass between the beast’s legs and out the door. The beast was ready for me, though. It pinned me down with its good arm and then contorted its entire torso to flog me across the face with its lame

arm like a whip.

The inside of my cheek split on my teeth and blood filled my mouth. I held up my arms to protect myself from the next blow, but the beast beat them away, and before I knew it I was getting pummeled. I curled up into the fetal position as it hit me again and again. My head was spinning, my consciousness wavering... and then the blows stopped.

The floor rumbled beneath me and more boxes fell from the closet shelves. I opened my eyes and looked at the beast, expecting to see it winding up for the final, killing blow. It wasn’t looking at me, though. Its ears were perked up, its head cocked sideways. The floor shook more violently and suddenly there was a great explosion of wood around me and a wraith-like form—a blur of tendons and teeth—flew out of nowhere and tackled the beast. The beast roared like a bear, but the wraith screeched even louder, like a freight train horn, blotting out the beast’s cry.

I scrambled backward deeper into the closet, completely disoriented and baffled by what was happening, but then Penny was there, grabbing my hand and pulling me up.

XIV.

The hardwood floor in the hallway began splitting like a slab of concrete during an earthquake. The wall lanterns sputtered, one moment snuffed out, the next moment glaring with phosphorescent brilliance. The two grappling creatures in the master bedroom behind us screeched and the walls shook. Chunks of plaster rained down on our heads from the ceiling.

Still in a daze, I let Penny lead me down the rocking stairs. It took me a moment more to realize she was taking us to Grams’ room.

“No, wait!” I yelled, between spitting out mouthfuls of blood. “What are you doing?”

Penny tried to pull me onward, but I stopped her in the archway between the great room and the breakfast nook while furniture, lamps, and wall hangings toppled around us.

“Penny, we can’t go in there. She’ll kill me.”

“She’s upstairs, dummy—fighting your uncle.”

Of course. The wraith was Grams. She had saved me.

Penny tugged at my hands to get my attention. “Promise me, Dedrick, if I show you the way out you’ll take me with you.”

"There's a way out?"

"Promise me, Dedrick."

"Yes, I promise. Of course."

"Promise you'll keep me with you forever, no matter what happens?"

An explosion boomed upstairs and the whole house lurched as if it were spinning on some diagonally opposed axis. Penny careened into me and we both toppled to the ground.

"Go!" I yelled, scrambling up to my hands and knees.

Penny wouldn't budge. "Promise me, Dedrick."

"I told you, yes. I promise I'll take you with me if we get out of here."

"Forever?"

"Yes, forever. Now get us the hell out of here."

Penny pecked me on the cheek, then spun away and sprinted towards Grams' room. I followed after as fast as I could, dodging the sliding chairs and table in the breakfast nook. Penny threw open the door and I followed her in, only to stop with a gasp. The room reeked of shit. The bed was overturned and torn apart, and hanging from the wall above the bed were chains with broken manacles at the end.

Penny was unfazed. She slammed the door behind us and went straight to the basement hatch in the middle of the floor. She flipped it open and disappeared into the floor. I hesitated for a moment, remembering my fall the last time I went down these stairs, but there was another explosion upstairs and the ceiling beam above me split and began to cave in. I scrambled after Penny and closed the hatch just as the ceiling beam crashed downward and slammed into the floor above me.

XV.

We were in utter darkness.

At some point I realized we were walking up the stairs, not down them. By that point we'd been traversing step after step through blackness for ten minutes or more and so I was neither expecting to suddenly find ourselves in the Hearne basement nor all that surprised to find we were now climbing—spiraling slowly upward in a counter-clockwise direction. Honestly, I felt relieved to be climbing upward rather than delving deeper into whatever hellhole we were in.

"Where do these stairs lead?" I asked Penny.

"To the house where I found you."

"The real house?"

She said nothing. Maybe she nodded or shrugged, but in the darkness I couldn't tell and I couldn't help but feel like she was keeping more secrets from me.

"Penny, how did you get out of my uncle's room? The door was locked and you didn't have the keys."

"I dunno. It wasn't locked, I guess."

"It was locked. I'm sure of it."

Again she said nothing.

"Why didn't you tell me there was a way out?"

"It's dangerous. We shouldn't be talking."

"Well, too bad," I said. "We're going to talk about it."

I reached forward into the darkness and grabbed her, more forcefully than I intended, but she'd led me around on a wild goose chase in that house—almost getting the both of us killed—when she knew full well the entire time where the real way out was. And now here she was dismissing my questions like I was the child.

"Dedrick, please, I'll tell you when we get out. Not now."

"No, what's going on, Penny? Why didn't you tell me?"

"We couldn't have got out anyway. Mother was there in her room. The only reason we got out is because you woke your uncle and she had to go fight him."

"You still could have told me. You lied to me, Penny."

"Please, be quiet," she pleaded, grabbing onto my arms. "You're being too loud."

I was hearing none of it. "Why'd you lie, Penny? Why did you drag me around that whole goddamned house, then try to keep me—"

I stopped mid-sentence, for we were suddenly standing in a dining room: the Hearne dining room, but without any walls, and a low, obtrusive ceiling. A girl about the same age as Penny sat at the table staring down at a book, and an older boy loomed behind her. The girl wore a simple country dress, had her hair up in braided pigtails. The boy wore a loose knit white shirt and blue overalls.

"Mistress Cecil told me she saw you peeking at Billy Boyden's test, Terra," the boy said, and I inhaled sharply, realizing I was looking at Uncle Ormund and my mother as children. "Are you saying she's a liar?" Ormund continued.

My mother said nothing, kept staring down at her book. Ormund grabbed her around the chin and yanked her head to look up at him.

“Ow!” she cried and he smacked her across the face with his other hand.

“Answer me, Terra! Did you cheat? Did you copy off of Billy Boyden’s test?”

“I didn’t know the answer,” she sobbed.

Ormund raised his hand to smack her again and I instinctively moved forward to stop him, but Penny grabbed me around the waist from behind and Ormund stayed his hand regardless. He looked up from my mother, toward me and Penny I thought at first, but then I realized he was looking past us, and his head was cocked slightly as if listening to someone speak from a hilltop behind us.

“Mother,” he said after a moment, “She’s turning into a little liar and a cheat. If I’m not allowed to her punish her, how is she to learn?”

My mother looked up then, toward the ceiling. She nodded as if it were talking to her. “Yes, mother,” she said, and then she got up and ran out of the room into the surrounding shadows.

“I’m warning you, Mother,” Ormund said, “She a rotten girl—she needs discipline.”

Ormund disappeared as he said this and then the dining room, and Penny and I were left standing on the dark staircase again, her arms still clutched around my waist.

XVI.

“Weird things always happen like that on the stairs,” Penny said in a hushed voice as we continued upward. “That’s why mother doesn’t like me playing here.”

It was starting to make some sort sense to me now. We were caught in Grams’ memory vaults, and the house below us—the fake house—was some kind of sanctuary—or prison—Grams had built for Penny.

“That girl was my mother,” I whispered to Penny. “At least, it was my mother fifty years ago or so. And the boy was my uncle.”

“They don’t usually last that long.”

“What doesn’t? The memories?”

“Yeah, I guess. I usually just see a few people or a room every once in a while or hear people talking and they disappear real quick.”

Suddenly it was light and we were walking through a wall-less bedroom. It was simply furnished, with a single bed, nightstand, and dresser. It was my mother’s room. It was empty and it disappeared

after a moment and we were in darkness again.

“Like that?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Could it be that we hurt Grams? Or that the monster—my uncle—hurt her?” I didn’t really believe the monster was my uncle, but rather another prop, gone mad like all the toys, and Grams, but I didn’t tell that to Penny.

“Maybe,” she said. “The house was messed up pretty awful and that usually makes her tired.”

A sudden thought occurred to me. “My uncle couldn’t kill her, could he?”

“I don’t think so,” she said, but she didn’t sound sure.

I couldn’t help but think how people always said that if you died in a dream your heart would stop and you’d never wake up. If Grams died while we were trapped in this world of memories she’d created, where did that leave us? Then again, she was already dead, wasn’t she? Every time I tried to get my head around what was going on a myriad of answerless questions boggled my mind and left me more confused than before.

We trudged onward, up the dark stairs. After a while Penny called a halt and I could hear her struggling with something.

“What’s wrong?”

“My shoes are hurting. I’m taking them off.”

“You should probably keep them on,” I told her. “It’s dark and God knows what you might step on in here.”

“They hurt. I’m not wearing them anymore.”

She was determined so I let the matter go and we continued on, her now barefoot. Shortly thereafter we found ourselves in the great room, which, like my mother’s bedroom, was unoccupied and without walls. We passed through the room wordlessly and back into darkness. The kitchen appeared and disappeared as we continued on and I began to relax a little, thinking that this would maybe be the extent of our journey—walking up stairs and passing through a series of unoccupied rooms—but then we heard a startled shriek and found ourselves once again in my mother’s room.

XVII.

I have no childhood memories of my mother, and Uncle Ormund never told me much about her other than to make it clear that she had

abandoned me. When, as an adult, I finally met my mother, I learned little from her. She was excited to meet me, excited to be friends, but she didn't want to be my mother, didn't want to tell me about her past. Anything I knew about my mother was based on the whispers I heard behind my back as a child, the taunts I sometimes heard from people who didn't like the Hearne family. I knew my mother got pregnant with me young, and unmarried. My uncle wouldn't tell me who my father was, but by the time I was nine or ten I realized that the image looking back at me in mirrors was too dark-haired and brown-eyed to be a proper, white Hearne boy.

Standing there in my mother's room now, I knew right off that the young man in bed with her was my father. He couldn't have been more than fifteen years old, a Hispanic boy with the first hints of a mustache. His face was ashen as he looked up and around at the room.

My mother, no more than fourteen or fifteen years old herself, had clutched the sheets around herself and she was crying. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Mother."

The young man—my father—jumped from beneath the bedding, ashamed and covering himself as he grasped his dusty work clothes from the floor. "I'm sorry, senora. Please, don't send me and mi padre away. I would like to marry your daughter very much. I will work very hard. I promise you. Mi padre will help us buy a home to—"

The room shuddered and the young man blanched.

"No, Mother!" my mom screamed. "I love him. Don't."

My father pulled his pants on hastily. "Es bueno, mi amor," he told my mother. "I will go. She's right. It's best this way."

My mother stood up from the bed with the sheets still clutched around her and went to kiss him. The room shuddered again and she halted. They both looked upward at the ceiling, and then my father ran off.

"Alright," my mother said, nodding her head and still crying. "But please, don't tell Ormund. Whatever you do, don't tell Ormund."

XVIII.

"We should be there by now," Penny said.

We'd been walking in silence for maybe half an hour after my mother's room disappeared.

"How long does it usually take?" I asked, only halfway paying attention to what she was saying, so shaken I was by what I'd seen.

"I don't know—it's always different—but it's never taken this long before."

"Penny, have you ever seen that memory before?" I asked finally. "With my mother and that man?"

"The Mexican?"

"Yeah."

"No. But I heard his voice before. I heard him and your mom making bedroom noises before."

"Okay," I said, meaning to end the conversation at that, but Penny wasn't about to let it go.

"Were they having S-E-X, Dedrick?"

"I don't know," I lied. "Forget about it."

"Do you have S-E-X with the girl you're married to? Do you like it?"

"Penny!" I admonished her, too loudly I realized, but too late.

Cued by my voice, our surroundings lit up and we were standing in the Hearne master bedroom, with the old canopied bed in the center. Three people stood around it: my mother, maybe seven years old; Uncle Ormund, no more than ten; and a doctor. On the bed was an old man, Grandpa Hearne, I realized, although, he looked nothing like the photographs I'd seen of him. He was frail and thin, and his face was jaundiced.

"Do it, Ormund!" Grandpa Hearne hollered.

"Mr. Hearne," the doctor interrupted. "I hardly think it wise for you to be drinking in your current state."

"You and your advice can go to hell, for all the good it's done me," Grandpa Hearne spat, spurning on a fit of coughing that racked his body.

"Pa," my mother said when he'd settled, "You gonna be alright?"

A sound like distant thunder reverberated through the room.

"I don't need a lecture from you, devil woman," Grandpa Hearne growled, glaring up at the room around him. "Now do as I told you, Ormund. Never mind your mother."

"She threw out all the whiskey," Ormund said.

"Then get me some goddammed wine! I'm pretty sure we've got some of that around."

Ormund dashed away into the darkness. My mother stepped toward the bed, tenderly, but Grandpa Hearne shooed her away.

"Ah, get the hell out of here. All of you. Get!" He fell into another fit of coughing. My mother and the doctor disappeared. All that

remained was Grandpa Hearne on the bed and the room. Grandpa's coughing worsened and a globule of bloody mucous flung from his nose and mouth as his eyes clenched in pain. His back arched and he wheezed inward sharply before finally collapsing into an inert form on the mattress. He slowly turned yellow and then he was gone. There was a distant rumbling noise and then the canopied bed and room disappeared too.

XIX.

Penny and I walked wordlessly for some time, her leading the way upward through the dark and me following along, lost in my own thoughts. At some point, she slowed and I was jarred out of my reverie. She was breathing heavily and grunting in pain.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I just have a stomachache."

"Do you want to stop and rest for a minute?" I asked.

"No," she replied curtly, and I let the matter go, merely thinking her weary. God knows, I was.

My ear throbbed and my cheek too. We trudged on, slower than before, and I could hear Penny was struggling.

"When we get out of here, I'm going to take you to my home in Nevada," I said, thinking to take her mind off her upset stomach. "I think you'll like it. You'll have your own room. And there's a swimming pool in the backyard."

"Is it as big as Mother's house?"

"No, but it's newer, much more modern," I replied, thinking what a shock it was going to be for Penny to finally leave this place and see how much things had changed in the last twenty odd years.

"Will your wife be there?"

"Yes, she lives there too. Her name is Erica. She'll be excited to meet you."

"I don't think I'll like her."

I was somewhat taken aback. "That's not a very nice thing to say. You've never even met her."

She said nothing, only grunted again in pain. I felt as if I should say something more—reprimand her for being rude, or tell her how sweet Erica could be and how much Erica wanted a little girl—I didn't know, which—but we were suddenly in my mother's room again and Penny cried out. I pulled her back protectively and scanned the room for

danger, but it was empty except for the furnishings.

"What is it?" I asked, turning back to Penny, and I followed her glance down to her legs and bare feet. They were covered in blood. All the way down to her bare feet. "Oh my God, are you hurt?" I said, kneeling down in front of her, but then I saw how thin the blood was, saw how high up the pink dress was above her knees and how tightly it was stretched across her chest, mashing down budding breasts that had not been there before. She too noticed all these things.

"Have I flowered?"

I stood up and saw that she was taller, now shoulder height compared to me. I remembered the shoes she discarded earlier because they hurt her feet. Because she was outgrowing them. "Grams must be losing control of you," I said, grasping onto this sudden hope rather than having to further consider what was happening to Penny. "We must be close. We have to keep going."

I made to grab her hand and move on, but a panic-stricken look crossed her face and she nudged her head downward at her blood sodden garments.

"Right, sorry," I said, looking around the room for something she could wear. The closet door was slightly ajar. I opened it and to my relief found a closet full of dresses. I picked the most casual looking one and inspected it. It was only a little big for Penny by my estimation and looked corporeal enough, although, there were no visible threads holding the seams together. I tossed it to her and turned away so she could change. "Quickly," I urged her.

"What about my panties?" she asked after a moment.

I went to the dresser, but found it to be inoperable, like all the prop furniture in the fake house below. "You're just going to have to go without," I said. She looked at me with a wry expression, nodded, and slipped off her sodden undergarment beneath the new dress that hung loosely on her shoulders. I kept my eyes averted from the pile of blood-soaked clothes on the floor and motioned for her to lead the way. She did so with a new vigor in her step.

The room disappeared behind us and we started climbing steps again, but before going completely dark, our surroundings brightened and we were in the foyer. It was hazy, and figures began to materialize in front of us, only slowly coming into focus. Not wanting to see anymore and determined to get the hell out of Gram's twisted mind, I hurried forward, watching the figures with a sidelong glance.

Penny stopped, of course—we had stopped every time before when

we encountered people—and so I ran headlong into her. I cried out in surprise and she stumbled forward, stepped on the hem of her dress which was too long, and crashed to the floor.

“Who’s there?” a voice shouted out, and I looked up from Penny to see Uncle Ormund walking right towards us.

XX.

I knew that making noises or other distractions somehow awoke or summoned all these memories we were witnessing, but it had never occurred to me that we could actually interact or alter these memories in Grams’ mind. They were memories after all, weren’t they? Or were they dreams? Nightmares. The image of bear trap jaws, chains, and shit flashed through my mind.

I stood frozen as Ormund walked toward us, staring right at us, but then his gaze moved up and away and he turned back to the other figure in the foyer.

“My apologies, Birney,” Ormund said to the young man standing there in a mismatched five piece suit. The man’s face was distorted, asymmetrical, giving him a permanent leering countenance. “This is my mother,” Ormund continued. “Mother, you remember Albert Birney from church?”

The room rumbled around us.

Ormund’s jaw clenched. “Yes, well Terra should be down any moment.”

And there she was coming down the stairs, my mother dressed in a flowing gown that was pleated beneath the breast line so that her swollen belly was only slightly perceptible. She forced herself to smile.

“She’s fatter than I remember,” Birney said when she stopped and curtsied in front of him.

My mother’s smile faded and even Ormund looked displeased. “We discussed the situation already, Birney,” Ormund said flatly.

“Right,” Birney muttered. “C’mon, then, let’s get acquainted.” He clamped a meaty hand around my mother’s upper arm and pulled her toward the front door.

“Let go of me!” she yelled, pulling herself free and spinning to retreat back up the stairs, but Ormund was there to grab her.

“You promised,” Ormund hissed at her. “Try to act like a lady. He’s being a gentleman and taking you to the theatre.”

My mother closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Alright,” she

said and returned to Birney and offered her arm. He took it up somewhat more gently this time.

“I don’t mind a girl that likes to spread her legs,” he said to Ormund, “but if she don’t learn to only spread them for me and keep her mouth shut, I ain’t about to marry her.”

My mother smacked him across the face, stunning him for a moment, and she rushed away. This time Ormund let her go.

“Fucking bitch!” Birney said after a moment, making to go after her.

The room rumbled, and Ormund grabbed him. “You best go, Birney. I’m sorry. I’ll punish her, don’t you worry.”

Birney collected himself and walked toward the front doors. When he disappeared into the darkness, Ormund turned toward the stairs. “Terra—goddammit—get down here!”

The room shook.

“No, mother, she didn’t have a right! She’s a whore. We’d have been better off if you’d just let that goddamned wetback have her.”

XXI.

“Your uncle is real mean to the real Terra,” Penny said when the foyer had disappeared and we were continuing up the steps. “You think that’s why she left when you were a little baby?”

“I guess so.” Truly, I didn’t know what to think. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. The dress doesn’t seem so loose anymore.”

We must’ve been talking too loudly because we were suddenly in my mother’s room again. It was empty so we kept moving on, but in the brief light I saw that Penny was indeed taller already. She was skinny and her face had thinned some; that’s all I noticed before we slipped into the darkness and onto more steps.

Penny had said nothing more about reaching the real Hearne house, about how it was taking so long, but it had been on my mind. Grams’ hold over Penny was weakening, clearly, but she still had some control over us, otherwise we would be free by now. This was her realm, and whatever happened to her back in the fabricated house below, whatever fatigue or weakness she was experiencing—be it temporary or permanent—we were still trapped in her crazed, dead mind. As I thought this, visions of shit specked teeth flashed through my mind, and Penny being pulled into that pit of chains, shit, and

blood. I shook my head and squeezed my eyes shut to rid myself of the nightmare. When I opened them we were in Grams' room and I stopped, paralyzed.

On the bed, beneath the quilted covers, a huge, misshapen lump moved restlessly. It snored like some great grizzly bear, shaking the floor beneath our feet. The sleeping beast—Grams, I knew—was chained to the wall, but still I stood frozen. Penny had to grab my hand, and forcefully pull me to get me moving, and even then I walked stiff with fear and shame that Penny had been the brave one.

XXII.

When it again became light we found ourselves in my mother's room. This time it was occupied. My mother lay screaming upon the bed. The doctor stood hunched over between her outstretched legs. "Push," he yelled, then again. Ormund stood in the distance, watching. I could feel the presence of Grams in the room around us, embodied in the room around us.

"Push!" the doctor yelled over my mother's screaming, and then there was a new voice: mine.

The doctor held my infant form in the crook of his arm and snipped away my umbilical cord as my mother panted and cried. When the cord was clipped and cut away, he offered me to my mother, but she was staring up at the ceiling, glass-eyed, and she screamed out again in pain.

"The afterbirth," the doctor said, handing me over to Ormund, who looked reluctant at first. But I saw wonderment in his eyes.

"One more time now," the doctor yelled at my mother. "One more good push."

My mother screamed and the room trembled beneath our feet.

XXIII.

I expected the room to fade away like all the others had, but it didn't. Instead, the light only dimmed and brightened again a moment later. My mother was gone and a note lay folded upon the neatly made bed. My still infant form slept in a cradle beside the bed. Uncle Ormund entered.

"What is it, mother?"

The room shook and Ormund looked at the note on the bed. He

opened it and read. His face hardened. "Goddamn her. Of all the irresponsible things—"

Before he could finish, the room shuddered and a lamp flew from the dresser-top and struck him in the shoulder.

"Christ!" Ormund yelled. "How's it my fault?"

The bedspread burst from atop the bed in a shredded mess. The dresser and nightstand toppled over and began spinning on the floor. The infant me began wailing.

"Damnit, mother. Stop. You're scaring him."

The closet door flung open and clothes hurled outward at Ormund. He knocked them away and grabbed me from the cradle. "Have your little tantrum," he yelled, "but I say, good riddance. She was a worthless little slut and we're better off without her." And with that he disappeared into the darkness with me in his arms.

The room buckled beneath our feet. The bed mattress flew into the air, and then the box-spring beneath it. Penny grabbed hold of me and we slunk back into the shadows of the room. The dresser splintered into a thousand pieces and the floor broke apart to be taken up into a cyclone. The cradle toppled over and was sucked up into the madness. The light pulsed bright and dark around us. I held Penny tightly and turned away from the room so that she was shielded from the debris. The floor shook even more violently, wood splinters howled around us, and I thought it would be the end for us, but then everything went still and when we opened our eyes we stood in darkness.

"Are you alright?" I whispered.

"Yeah." She seemed reluctant to let go of me.

"We have to keep going."

"Yeah."

She let go of me, but she was scared I could tell, so I held onto her hand and we started the stairs together. We climbed wordlessly, both a little shaken by the violence of the scene we'd witnessed. We passed through the kitchen, which was thankfully unoccupied, and then back into darkness. Sometime later we began hearing voices. They became louder as we continued, then solidified.

We were in Grams' room. It was Ormund who was talking, sitting in a chair beside the bed and looking over a stack of mail. The bed itself was alive. The mound beneath the covers mottled. The whole bed frame bowed inward and outward as if breathing.

"She said no," Ormund was saying, angrily. "I don't know what else I can do. Between taking care of you and Dedrick, I haven't time

to spend with a woman properly. She doesn't know me. How could we even expect her to say yes."

The bed shuddered, but Ormund ignored it. He looked at one of the letters in his hand closely and tossed it at the bed with disgust. "The bank is threatening to foreclose the estate if we're late on another payment. We'll have to sell the truck and let the rest of our workers go."

The bed crinkled, almost folded in half.

"Well, I'm sorry, Mother. I don't know what to tell you. With this goddamned drought, the grape crop hasn't yielded spit. If we have to we can lease the vineyards to Spencer Thomas. God knows he's made the offer enough times—let him deal with grapes and all the goddamned Mexicans. I don't have—" Ormund stopped mid-sentence, his attention focused on the last of the unopened letters.

The bed lurched forward toward him.

"Nothing, mother, it's not for you," he said, tucking the letter away and making to leave.

The bed groaned.

"Don't be ridiculous," Ormund said. "I told you, it's not for you. It's for me, so just let it be."

The bed twisted. It sounded like steal pipes bending.

Ormund stepped toward the bed and jabbed at it with a pointed finger. "That's enough! I've had enough of your tantrums. The next outburst from you and I'm calling the doctor again."

The bed didn't move, but the room rumbled around us.

Ormund stared at the bed for a moment more, then walked away and the room faded to black.

XXIV.

The next room that appeared was my mother's room. It wasn't quite right, though. It was still furnished as I remembered it, but a pink and purple paisley bedspread had taken the place of my mother's bedspread and a lone teddy bear sat atop the pillows.

I meant to keep walking, but Penny stopped and sat on the bed. "I need to rest for a minute."

I remained standing and eyed the teddy bear with suspicion, remembering the stuffed animals and toys that attacked us in the attic.

Penny stretched her legs with a little grunt, then stopped and looked closely at her ankles that now protruded well beyond the hem

of the dress she wore. I looked too and saw what she was wrinkling her nose about: hair. It was light colored and far from coarse, but it still stood out against the backdrop of her pale skin. She wiggled her toes and wrinkled her nose even more and I started to laugh, but then I really looked at her. She wasn't a little girl anymore. She looked to be maybe eighteen or nineteen years old now. She was still thin, but had filled out since I'd last gotten a chance to really look at her. Her face was less angular, her lips more full, and her breasts noticeably larger. I realized I was staring and that she was looking at me.

"Sorry," I stammered, but she only smiled and then, as if the idea just occurred to her, hopped up from the bed and smothered me with a kiss. It was clumsy how she grabbed my head, accidentally bit my lower lip, yet it was passionate, and her body pressed against mine stirred my blood like it hadn't been in a long time. It was only with tremendous effort that I was able to slowly pull myself from her.

She made a fake little sad face at me. "Don't you love me, Dedrick?"

"Yes, but it's..." I didn't know what to say.

"Then keep kissing me. On the bed." She grabbed my hand and yanked me towards the paisley comforter.

"No," I said, too brusquely, I realized when I saw the earnestly pained look on her face.

"Why not? If you love me..."

"There are lots of types of love," I tried explaining, but she just looked at me, confused. "You're still a girl, Penny. I'm a grown up, and I'm married."

"I love you more than your wife."

Again, I didn't know what to say. She was probably more right than she had any way of knowing. "Look," I said finally, "we can talk about it later, when we're out of here, when we're safe."

She nodded her head, but I could see she was hurt. She turned and led the way out of the room and we trudged back into darkness.

XXV.

We walked silently now, but the rooms seemed to appear more frequently. We passed through the great room, the dining room, the foyer, the dining room again—all of them empty except for the furnishings, which I began more and more to recognize from my childhood. The next occupied room we came to was Grams' bedroom,

and it was only occupied by the bed. It was alive, slumbering and chained to the wall, but it still scared the hell out of me. Thoughts of what lay beneath the covers bombarded my mind. I didn't freeze up, at least. Penny and I stayed to the shadows and moved silently through the room into the darkness and the stairs.

Again we passed through a series of unoccupied rooms, then started hearing voices. When they came into focus we were in Grams' room and I shuddered, knowing we'd have to stand silently aside while the memory ran its course.

To my horror, I was in the memory. I was four and lying on the bed next to the undulating mound beneath the bedspread. I held a book up above my face, babbling some nonsensical story that I was clearly making up. The bed vibrated in annoyance.

"No, Grams!" the four-year-old me shouted. "It's my story." And the little me continued to babble on the make-believe story.

The bed shook this time and the little me fell off the bed to hit the floor and start crying. I swallowed and pushed myself farther back into the shadows. I didn't remember Grams ever having hit me. Admittedly, I didn't remember most things from my childhood, but it still shocked me.

Uncle Ormund walked in then and saw the little me crying on the floor. He picked me up and dusted off my bottom. "Knock it off. You're a boy, not a little girl. Now what are you fussing about?"

The bed shuddered and Ormund looked at it with incredulity. "Mother, he's four years old. You can't expect him to read yet." He snatched up the book from the bed and thumbed through it. "What is this rubbish anyways? Fairytales? I don't think we need to be filling the boy's head with fairytales, mother, and God knows they're no thing for an old woman to be reading. I'll get something suitable for you to read from the study if that's what you want to do with your time."

The bed rumbled and again Ormund looked down at it with disdain. "No, mother! If we receive any word from her, you'll be the first to know."

The bed was still. My skin prickled. Who was he talking about? Receive word from who?

Ormund turned to the four-year-old me. "Out," he said. "You're not allowed in Grams' room anymore unless I'm here with you? Hear me? Hear me!?"

XXVI.

If the rooms had seemed to appear frequently before, they came even more rapidly now. One hardly disappeared before another appeared. Although empty, we heard voices almost continually. At one point we passed through my mother's room and heard moaning—bedroom noises as Penny had termed it. I pretended not to notice and moved us right along out of the room.

I began to worry because we were spending more and more time passing through rooms and less time going up the stairs, and up was where I wanted to be going. Up and the hell out of there. After some time—probably not as long as it seemed—we came to the dining room and were forced to stop. There were children there. It took me a moment to process what I was seeing. The children were me and Penny, but we were dressed all wrong. We were wearing the same clothes Uncle Ormund and my mother had worn during a memory we watched earlier: me in a white shirt and blue, denim overalls, and Penny in a simple country dress.

Uncle Ormund—the older Uncle Ormund I knew as a child—walked in carrying a birthday cake and he and little Penny began singing to the little me. I—the real me—leaned forward and looked closely at the cake.

It had seven candles on it. I counted twice to make sure, because here's the thing: Grams died when I was six. She wasn't even alive to have experienced this moment.

I pulled the real Penny closer towards me.

The seven-year-old me blew out the candles and the other Penny and Uncle Ormund clapped. The little me pulled out one of the candles and licked the frosting off the bottom. He pulled out another and handed it to little Penny. "Here, Terra," he said.

The little me had called Penny "Terra."

I stepped forward, as if to somehow protest. Luckily, Penny had the good sense to grab me and pull me back before I got too close. As it was, Ormund swung his head towards us and looked around suspiciously. The room disappeared then and we were left in darkness.

"What's wrong with you?" Penny hissed.

"Grams was dead before my seventh birthday; that's what's wrong. And I called you Terra; that's what's wrong."

"So what? Mother calls me Terra."

In her simplistic way she was right. Grams thought of Penny as Terra. That was the problem. We were in Grams' memories and Grams didn't differentiate between Penny and my mother. "C'mon," I

whispered, pushing Penny onward. "Let's get the hell out of here."

We stepped forward, but we must have been too loud. Almost immediately we were accosted by a blood-curdling scream and we were in another room. A plate of food whirled past my face and disappeared into the darkness. The stench of shit washed over us.

"Goddamnit!" Uncle Ormund yelled. "It's for your own good. Settle down!"

The bed was a writhing beast, stooped over and chained to the wall of the bedroom. Tentacles lashed out from beneath the bedspread. One of them flung shit at the doctor who stood beside Ormund. Another tentacle hurled a serving tray at the two of them. The racket the beast made was deafening, like an old steam shovel grinding away at a rock quarry.

"She's beyond my help," the cowering doctor yelled out. "All we can do at this point is keep her sedated."

"Easy for you to say," Ormund hollered back, "You don't have to pay for it."

The monster threw another pile of shit, which splattered across Ormund's face. He growled and rushed forward at the bed. The tentacles shied away as if to shield itself from a blow. Ormund didn't hit the monster, though. Instead, he grabbed the tentacles and forced them up and out of the way against the wall. "Quickly," he said through gritted teeth.

The doctor moved forward, a hideous hypodermic needle suddenly in hand.

I couldn't bare to watch any more. I grabbed at Penny. "Go," I mouthed silently. She resisted at first, but I forced her ahead. The screaming and light receded behind us and I pushed us on even more rapidly. The surrounding light flickered, then distinguished.

The screams behind us were suddenly screams in front of us. I grabbed Penny and pulled her to stop.

Something was around us. I pulled Penny closer to me. Something slithered across the floor and brushed against my ankle. I peered down through the inky blackness, trying to make out our surroundings. Slowly—agonizingly slowly—the room illuminated. I made out slithering, serpent like shapes first—all around us—then the granite stone floor; then the gagging stench of urine and shit; and then in a flash—at an exponential rate—it all blurred into focus: the low wood slat ceiling, the writhing tentacles with spines of rusted chain, the bear-trap jaws spewing shit and blood.

Penny cried out and I instinctively put myself in front of her. I knocked aside a tentacle coming towards my face, kicked away another at my feet. I tried backing us away, but no matter where we went we seemed to be facing the same direction, toward Grams' maw of shit, blood, and chains.

The beast howled at us, lashed its tentacles at us. I held up my arms to shield away the blows, but none of them struck me. It wasn't until Uncle Ormund yelled out from behind us that I realized Grams wasn't attacking us at all, that this was another memory.

Ormund materialized from the surrounding darkness, a leather belt held in one hand. He cracked it down onto the stone floor and thrust a tray full of food forward. A tentacle swiped the tray aside.

"Fine," Ormund yelled. "Eat off the floor if that's the way you want it. If you could manage to act in a civilized manner, I'd let you go back up in your room."

Another tentacle lashed out at him. He brushed it aside and brandished his belt. The tentacles shied away and the bear-trap maw hissed submissively. Only for a moment, though. As soon as Ormund turned away the tentacles whipped forward and lashed him across the back of the head. He staggered forward, stunned. When he turned back to face the monster, his eyes were mad. He seemed to grow in stature.

"Think you can strike me, old woman?"

He cracked the whip down onto one of the tentacles. The maw screeched and spat at him. He hit it again, this time squarely in its face. The tentacles fought back in a sudden frenzy, lashing and curling around his arms and neck. Still he got bigger and his right arm raised above the tentacles and brought down the belt with a crack. Again and again and again he struck, until finally, the tentacles went limp and the maw exhaled with a gurgling sigh.

The basement faded away and in the dark I half-whispered, half-shouted toward Penny, "Go, go!"

We raced up the curving stairs, passed through room after room, and more stairs and more rooms, left distant voices behind us, and still ran on until we could run no more and collapsed onto the ground, blinded by the sweat and fear in our eyes.

XXVII.

When I finally caught my breath, I realized I was lying on a bed. Penny laid over me, crying softly into my shoulder. We were in my

mother's room. It was back the way I remembered it, with the country bedspread.

My shoulder was asleep and wet with tears where Penny was resting her head, but still I was hesitant to stir her. She held onto me so trustingly, and I had one arm draped around her back and another cradling her head, I realized.

"Penny," I whispered. "We should get moving."

She raised her head up and looked at me, and for the first time I wasn't looking into the eyes of a child. There was pain and longing in those eyes. All these years she's lived in that freakish house, I thought. In a child's body. Waiting for me to come find her.

"I'm scared," she said. "I want you to keep holding me."

"I know," I said, and I leaned forward, only intending to kiss her on the forehead, but I didn't stop her when she instead leaned her head forward to meet her lips to mine.

She slid the rest of her body further up onto me as we kissed. Her hands explored down from my arms, along the sides of my chest, and I pulled her more tightly against me. She found the bottom of my shirt and ran her hands up and over my skin. I grabbed at her lithe body, at her legs wrapped around me. Her dress slid up along her thighs and my hands brushed across the soft hair between her legs. She let out a soft moan and I relented, gave myself over completely to the passion of the moment.

XXVIII.

At one time Erica and I had been passionate about each other. That passion slowly faded with time, and then died for good when we learned she couldn't have children. We still had a healthy sex-life, if not a little robotic, and I still loved her as you can't help but love someone whom you've cared for and lived with for such a large portion of your life, but the passion was gone and in its place, routine.

All these thoughts ran through my mind as I lay sprawled out with Penny. I had made a vow to Erica, I knew, and never before had I cheated on her—not even contemplated cheating on her. Yet here I was, unremorseful, laying with a hand cupped around one of Penny's breasts, having just taken her virginity. She had given herself to me so completely, as I had to her. She had taken me into her so willingly, so trustingly, although I knew it must have hurt her some, and never did her passion waver. She appeared to be in her late twenties, maybe

early thirties, I guessed, but as I looked over her body and face, I realized I couldn't really tell how old she was; her body and mind were completely unravished by the stresses of the real world. She'd never smeared her face with make-up, or felt the stress of toiling long days at a job, never been in love with someone who rejected her, or pickled her liver with gin, or smoked a cigarette, or even been exposed to smog. She was innocent. Apart from some lines around her eyes, no doubt caused by living in that madhouse with Grams, she was unblemished.

When she stirred and asked me to make love to her again, I didn't hesitate. I should have. I should have remembered where we were.

XXIX.

I was still on top of Penny, still inside her, when the room imploded around us. There had been no walls before, but there were now and they buckled inward. The door burst off its hinges and flew over the top of us. The dresser toppled over. The closet door blew open and sprayed us with dresses. Penny screamed and pulled the covers up as I scrambled off of her. Tentacles crept out from beneath the baseboards, from around the crown molding. The house bellowed with rage. I could feel Grams' presence.

I grasped my pants from the foot of the bed and pulled them on, then made to stand up, but saw at the last moment more chain-linked tentacles sprouting from beneath the bed. I stood atop of the bed instead and spun around to find a way out. Penny had pulled on her dress and stood beside me.

"The door!" I yelled, and grabbed her hand.

We leapt, over the tentacles stretching outward from beneath the bed. The wall ahead of us stretched away. We sprinted after it and suddenly it stopped and I ran square into the door, which had somehow reappeared. Penny fumbled at the doorknob as I staggered back, stunned by the collision. I shook my head and grabbed the doorknob myself. It wouldn't turn; the entire wall bowed inward when I yanked on it.

I kicked away one of the tentacles reaching for us and spun back around to face the room. There was a faint light illuminating the window, I saw. "Wait here," I told Penny and dashed across the room to the window. The pane was fused solid, but the glass shattered when I smashed it with my elbow. I leaned out, hoping to see trees and vineyards, or my rental car in the driveway. Instead I saw only void.

Not light, not dark. Void. An airless gust of wind blew my hair back. I looked down and saw we were in a tower, impossibly high, and yet at the base I somehow saw a pile of gelded men; farther off I saw the house, the nightmare Hearne house. It pulsed. Tentacles of chains sprouted from its base and spiraled up around the tower.

I pulled myself back into the room and looked hopelessly at Penny who still stood at the door. She looked at me and pointed.

"The keys," she yelled. "Your keys!"

Of course, my keys were still clipped to one of my belt loops. I was at Penny's side in three strides. The first key I thrust into the keyhole opened the door and we rushed ahead into darkness. The stairs shook beneath our feet as we spiraled upward and the bedroom disappeared below us. I could hear the stone steps splitting, could hear tentacles rooting through the grout between the cracks. One of them slapped at my ankle but I high stepped free of its grasp.

The stairs were gone suddenly and we were in the master bedroom. Grandpa Hearne tilted a decanter back against his lips and belched fire at us. We ducked away and were in the dining room. A teenaged Uncle Ormund chased after us with a yardstick in hand. "Goddamnit, Terra," he yelled. "Come here!" We outran him and were on stairs again, and then in Grams' room and a doctor with a rusty needle lumbered after us. "It's for your own good. It's for your own good!" Grams' room evaporated away and we ran through the attic, toys chasing us. I lowered my shoulder into a giant teddy bear, bowling it aside, and then crushed a porcelain doll underfoot as we once again traversed stairs. Moaning echoed around us and suddenly we were in my mother's room. The mustachioed demon fucking her leapt from between her legs and gnashed his teeth at us. Penny sidestepped him and I shoved him away. The bedroom turned into the study and snapping, manacle-toothed books cascaded from the bookshelf walls around us. They swirled and piled up in front of us, then turned into a mountain of unopened letters in the master bedroom beneath the impossibly tall canopied bed. Uncle Ormund sat atop the mountain, black hair bristling from his orange, simian head. "You'll never hear from her again," he chimed. "Never, never, never." And then we were in the great room and there I was, a twelve-year-old boy. "...five... six... seven..." I was saying, and little Penny dashed away in front of us. "No!" I yelled after her, but she didn't stop. We ran after her, through the foyer, through the dining room, through the kitchen, through the breakfast nook. "Ready or not, here I come!" I heard the twelve-year-

old me yell out. "No!" I yelled out at little Penny who ducked away into Grams' room. We followed after her. "No!" the real Penny yelled out at little Penny who pulled up the trap door and disappeared into the floor. We followed after her, through the trap door and up the stairs that should have been going down, and then—suddenly—we were in the basement. The real basement.

XXX.

Little Penny was gone. The real Penny and I stood upon the real stone foundation of the Hearne house. Above us were joists and a wood slat ceiling, which comprised the floorboards of Grams' bedroom above us. To our left were the stairs leading upward, one of the steps partway up broken in half. All around us were granite stone walls, again part of the foundation. In front of us, chained to the closest wall was Grams, the nightmare Grams from my suppressed memories, the beast that had stolen Penny away all those years ago—the gaping pit of rusted teeth, chain tentacles, shit, and blood.

I grabbed Penny and stopped dead in my tracks as Grams' maw bellowed. The stench of decay plowed over us. Mealworms wriggled through the cracks of the floor. Grams' tentacles moved towards Penny.

Give her to me, Ormund, Grams said, not with words but in our heads. *You won't take her from me again.*

"No!" Penny cried out. She grasped her arms around me. "Dedrick, don't let her take me."

And I remembered. I remembered how I had frozen and pissed myself as a boy when Grams dragged Penny away into that maw. I remembered the shame of not helping my best friend, and of the police officers laughing at me when I told them what happened. I remembered Uncle Ormund's stern reprimands and warnings to me to quit fibbing. I remembered the sleepless nights in my bedroom, and then finally the boarding school with the meds and the doctors that made it all fade away. I remembered.

Give her to me, Ormund, Grams said in my head as she reached outward with her tentacles. My arms tensed in sudden paralysis, my bladder squeezed, but I pinched the urine back and willed myself to step forward.

"I'm not Ormund," I said, "And she's not your daughter. You can't have her."

Grams hissed in my brain and struck. The tentacles knocked me

back and before I could regain my footing, one of them had hold of Penny. She screamed as it yanked her towards Grams' maw. I scrambled forward, slipping on the mealworms I was crushing beneath my shoes, but retaining enough balance to grab hold of Penny and reach the tentacle wrapped around her legs. I bit at it, felt feculent puss gush into my open mouth and one of my teeth crack on a link of the chain spine. I vomited, but bit down again, suddenly surging with adrenaline and fury. I forced my fingers into the flesh I had rent open with my teeth and wedged them beneath the chain, then yanked at it, up and away from the tentacle. It pulled loose like a string of beads buried in mud.

Grams shrieked in pain and the tentacle released Penny. I helped Penny to her feet and tried pushing her towards the stairs, but then the other tentacles were on me. One of them whipped my legs out beneath me. Another struck me across the face. The biggest of them wrapped around my chest and began constricting like a python. "Run," I tried wheezing toward Penny, but when I craned my head back I saw that the tentacles had her too.

She's mine, Grams said into our heads as she dragged us toward her maw. *And I'm going to kill you once and for all, Ormund.*

I'm not Ormund, I tried saying, but there was no breath in me.

"Dedrick!" Penny yelled, still struggling to get away.

I reached my hand weakly towards her and she stretched out, somehow grasped hold of it. I clamped down with what little strength I had left. Together we were able to pull ourselves together and the big tentacle around me loosened, only for a split second, but long enough for me to gasp in a razor breath.

"Dedrick!" Penny yelled out again.

I flailed, trying to free myself, and only managed to get my free arm wedged against my side between the tentacles. I reached out with my fingers, intending to pinch my way through the tentacles if nothing else. Instead, my fingers found my key ring. With sudden hope, I grasped at it so that the keys protruded outward from my fingers like blades, then jabbed at the tentacles holding me. They loosened for a moment and I pulled my arm free. I punched now at the tentacles around me with all my strength, driving the keys deep into tentacle flesh, grunting with the exertion. I could feel the tentacles recoil at the first few strikes, but then they steadied and constricted around me again.

You think this hurts? Grams taunted me. *I've lived a life of pain.*

It was hopeless. Already the bear trap teeth were licking at my

ankles and the tentacles were pulling us steadily into the maw.

"You promised!" Penny cried out at me. "You promised, Dedrick!"

I still had her held close to me. I still had my other arm free and the key ring in hand. I did the only thing left I could do: I pulled Penny as close as I could and held the keys to her throat.

"Stop," I said very calmly. "Stop or I kill her."

XXXI.

The tentacles loosened around us and I pulled Penny closer to me, pressed the keys up against her throat. Self-pity surged out from Grams in waves. *No, please*, she begged. *Don't take my daughter from me.*

I stood and dragged Penny up with me. She was crying, but I didn't dare look at her or say anything to reassure her.

"Listen to me," I yelled out at Grams. "Will you listen to me? If you don't I'll kill her."

Yes!

"She's not your daughter. Her name is Penny. Your daughter, Terra, left a long time ago. Can you understand that?"

She is my daughter!!!!

The pure, raw emotion burned through my mind in a white flash. My vision blurred and my knees almost buckled beneath me.

Don't take her away from me again!

I blinked my eyes open and closed, trying to refocus them on Grams. I could only see the tentacles as a blur, though, a web constricting around us. The only thing I could focus on clearly was Penny's neck and my keys held up against it.

"Dedrick," Penny sobbed.

We'll all die together if we must, Grams threatened.

I blinked my eyes again and saw the key protruding foremost between my fingers. It was the warded key left to me with Uncle Ormund's will. I remembered then the box I had found upstairs with the letters in it. The handwriting on them I didn't recognize, but did. And the distorted dreams we'd seen with Ormund hording letters away. Sitting on top of a mountain of letters.

Release her or kill us all.

The web of tentacles constricted around us.

"No," I yelled out. "I can give you your daughter—the real Terra—if you promise to let us go free."

I didn't explain to Grams any further what I meant. I merely convinced her to hold me hostage while Penny went upstairs into the real house to retrieve the wooden chest full of letters. Penny gave Grams her word that she would return, and Grams relented. Beneath the anger, the loss, and sense of betrayal, I could sense a great weariness in her, a desire to trust someone.

I sat wordlessly in the basement, Grams' tentacles spread around me like some saurian nest, ready to squeeze my life away if Penny didn't return quickly enough.

She returned quick enough, with the box like I had instructed her.

I took it and opened the lid with the key Uncle Ormund had left me. Grams gasped in our minds when she saw the letters spill out. I grabbed up the first one and opened it, began to read the immaculate handwriting. The note was brief, but in it my mother said that she was safe, living in Crescent City, and that she loved me and Grams, and even Uncle Ormund. I read the next letter, and the next, and the next, in no particular order. They were very much similar, each from a different location, but all saying that my mother was fine and that she loved and missed us.

As I read the letters, the tentacles began to shrink away, and the bear trap maw softened. After a while, the shape of a woman began to take form, chained up against the wall. Several letters later, I could see that she was crying—tearlessly, but crying nonetheless.

There were only three letters left.

"Go," I said to Penny. "Wait for me upstairs."

Yes, Grams whispered. *Go. Thank you for loving me, sweet child.* Penny hesitated.

"I'll be up in a minute," I promised.

She nodded, then turned away and exited up the stairs and through the hatch into the Hearne house.

I turned my attention back to Grams and read the last three letters.

When I was done, there was little left of her. Only a withered form hung from the manacles chained to the wall. I stood up and stepped up to her. I kissed my fingers and touched them to her forehead, then stuck a random key into the first manacle—I knew any of them would work—and unlatched it. I did the same for the second manacle and the now tiny figure collapsed to the ground and flitted apart like a cloud of cigar smoke. An airless breeze blew across my face like a sigh.

I climbed out of the cellar into Grams' room, haggard as hell: shirtless, part of one ear missing, my cheek split open, and my head throbbing. It took me a moment to realize Penny wasn't there. I knew that she had to be safe, that Grams was peacefully at rest, finally, but still I felt a panic deep inside me.

"Penny," I called out as I stepped out of the room into the breakfast nook. There was no response. I called out her name again in the great room, then in the foyer. I glanced up the stairwell with the dangling handrail, thinking she might have gone upstairs, but the front door creaked with a sudden gust of wind and I realized she must have gone outside. God knows, I couldn't blame her; I didn't want to ever set foot in the house again.

I limped out through the threshold and there on the porch stood Penny, completely naked. The dress she had been wearing was gone, disappeared along with Grams and the tower and the fake house and everything else. Penny's nudeness was not what shocked me, however. What shocked me was the rusty garden hoe in her hands, and my wife's body lying in a pool of blood. It took me a second to comprehend why Erica was even here, but then I saw the second rental car in the driveway and I remembered the argument we had over the phone after the funeral.

I bent down and touched Erica's bloodied face. Her forehead collapsed beneath my touch. Her eyes were lifeless. She was dead.

I stood, in a daze. "Why?"

"I'm sorry, Dedrick," Penny said, "But I love you more."

My lips moved, but nothing came out. All I could do was push Penny into my rental car, stick the key in the ignition, and speed away. ●

WEATHER

Diane Payne

Unlike most days when she stood by the door to greet us, today Ms. Ringwood walked to the window and pushed it open. A large gust of wind blew the papers off her desk. She laughed and said, "Don't you just love this wind?"

Becca picked up her papers and placed books on them so they wouldn't blow away again. Ms. Ringwood continued leaning out the window, similar to our dog when he rides in the car. "I just love this wind!" No one acknowledged her.

"I remember this bitterly cold wind while traveling through Siberia. That's a wind I'll never forget," she said walking toward her desk.

Ms. Ringwood seemed to have visited every country. She loved teaching Geography, telling us stories about people she met, showing us slides, making us weird food to go with each country.

Standing in front of our class, rambling on about Siberia, I couldn't take my mind off her breasts. Ever since I overheard the Biology teacher talking to the History teacher about how Ms. Ringwood had *perky tits*, I've found myself drifting off, staring at them.

Perky. Tits. Until I heard him use those words in the same sentence, I never thought tits could be perky. That seemed more like a word my grandmother would use to talk about a person's behavior, not a person's tit. Perky. But there she was, standing in front of the class, window blowing her loose blouse, revealing her perky tits.

The class was laughing at something funny she had just said while I was missing out on the entire story, lost in the world of perky, when Ms. Ringwood dropped to the ground and started convulsing. Some kids howled, thinking this was part of her hilarious travel story, others started screaming, realizing this was serious, and I stupidly noticed that the teachers were right: her breasts were perky, even while seizing, or whatever she was doing on the floor.

Something was seriously wrong with my head to be thinking that way, but it was uncontrollable, not unlike Ms. Ringwood's uncontrollable shaking. Neither of us could help it.

By the time the shaking stopped, two other teachers were in the room and Leslie had called 911 on her cell phone. I kicked myself for not being useful, running down the hall to get help, or standing beside her, holding her head, trying to prevent it from banging on the hard floor, the way Janine bravely wrapped her arms beneath her head, creating a pillow of sorts.

No one knew what to do. Ms. Ringwood remained on the floor, dazed but conscious. I was wishing for a gust of wind to bring her back to Siberia. But no wind could reach her on the floor.

The school nurse rushed into our room and insisted the two teachers bring us anywhere, as long as we were out of the room.

It was the last period before lunch so they told us to stay in the cafeteria. They had to get back to their own students so they sent a secretary to sit with us.

"Man, that was freaky." It was so *freaky* no one dared say anything about what had happened until Josh finally said what was on our minds.

"You think it was some memory about Siberia?" Lana asked. She was always analyzing everything. Ever since she started taking Psych, she believed she understood the meaning of everything.

"I think she had a seizure," Andy said. "We used to have an epileptic dog. She looked just like Ms. Ringwood."

We all laughed, imagining the dog looking like the real Ms. Ringwood, not the one writhing all-weird like on the floor.

"Seriously, she looked like she was having a seizure," Andy repeated, clearly disturbed by our laughter.

"On *House*, there was a woman seizing and they thought she had a brain tumor. You think she's dying?" Janelle whispered loudly.

"How old do you think she is?" Caleb asked.

"Hard to say," Camille answered. "Think she's thirty?"

"That old?" Robbie sounded disappointed.

I felt too guilty to say anything. There she was talking about the wind and I was contemplating all the meanings of perky.

"It's just so weird. One second she's telling us a story and the next second she's on the ground." Josh shook his head. "That's fucked up."

"I bet she has a brain tumor," Janelle said more loudly, wanting to make sure we all heard her diagnosis.

All of us jumped at the sound of thunder. The cafeteria door blew open and shut.

"Enough playing doctor," Rachel scolded us. "I can't believe this wind. It is amazing." Rachel didn't wait for the lunch bell to ring. She just opened the door and walked outside.

No one really paid attention to her. She was like me, someone no one really noticed. Except I watched Rachel spread her arms wide, as if she were a bird about to take flight. I couldn't see her face, just the back of her, but I imagined she had a wide grin on her face. Or, maybe it was a meditative sigh. Hair blowing in the wind, arms stretched wide, this is my truest image of Rachel.

"She's a freak," Janelle said, finally noticing. "Anything to be different."

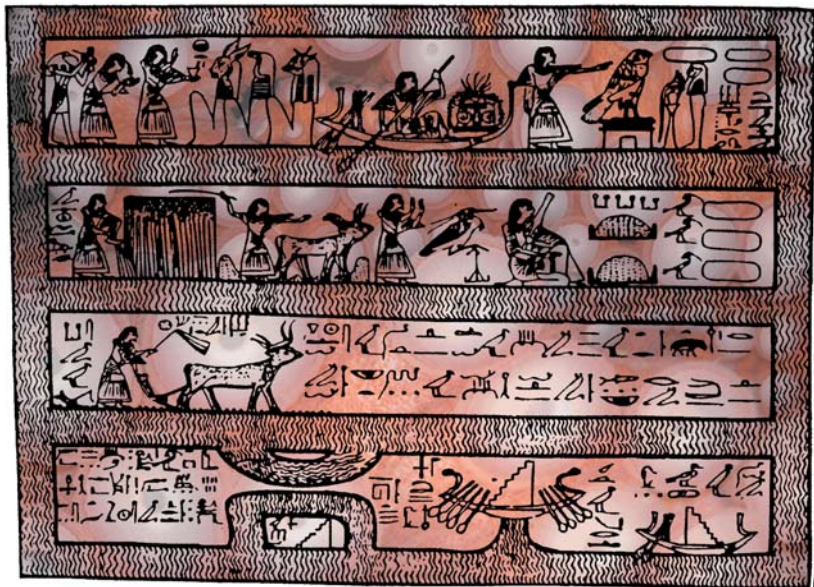
And just like that, everyone turned to look at Rachel, and every one of us watched her get hit by lightening, a sight none of us will ever forget.

Rachel had that same dazed look when they lifted her into the ambulance.

The wind disappeared.

The lightning ended.

Ms. Ringwood and Rachel drifted in other realms, dazed, yet somewhat mesmerized, while I remained in the same place, pondering stupid things like perky tits. ●



CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

Bric Barnes ("Cthulhu's Nightmare," page 22), alter ego and resident artist to the body of Rich Pearl, is a writer of short stories, poetry, and everything in between. His work has appeared in *Motley Fool*, *Champagne Shivers*, *Astropoetica*, *The Copperfield Review*, and other publications.

Garrett Calcaterra ("The Key Ring," page 44) is a writing instructor at Chapman University and the Orange County High School of the Arts. His writing has appeared in numerous magazines and fiction anthologies, including *Sex & Seduction*, *The Oregon Literary Review*, *Impose*, and *The Rejected Quarterly*. His website is www.myspace.com/gcalcaterra.

K.S. Clay ("Mi Morena," page 4) is a writer from Northern California fascinated by spooky stories; she is currently at work on a novel. Her website is <http://ksclay.net>.

K.S. Conlon ("Drown," page 43) lives in Brisbane, Australia and has previously published work in *A Fly in Amber*, *Scifaikuest* and *Dead Letters: The Magazine of the Zombie Apocalypse*.

Matt Finucane ("A Curse in Any Language," page 30) is a musician and writer living in London. An e.p. ("Episodes") was recently released by Light Crude Records. His horror/fantasy novel *Leland Poet* is due for publication this spring by Legend Press, and various short stories are scheduled to come out in 2009 in venues such as *Murky Depths* and *The Third BHF Book of Horror Stories*. His website is <http://www.myspace.com/mattfinucane>.

Catherine J. Gardner ("Uncle Eric's Leather Bound Tale," page 34) has had over sixty of her short stories published in various magazines and anthologies. She has work forthcoming in *Postscripts*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Space and Time*, *Necrotic Tissue*, and the *Dead Souls* and *Malpractice* anthologies. She blogs at <http://fright-fest.blogspot.com>.

Jason Hardy ("The Night Visitor," page 18) hails from southeastern Massachusetts, where he spends his daylight hours writing and editing for an appraisal firm. He writes fictional tales of woe when more respectable folks are sleeping, and has recently sold stories to *Coyote Wild* and *Necrotic Tissue*.

Dev Jarrett ("What Friends Are For," page 10) is a soldier in the U.S. Army currently stationed at Fort Shafter, Hawaii. His previous publications include short fiction in *Niteblade* e-zine, *Hungur Magazine*, and the 2007 *Southern Fried Weirdness* anthology, and the standalone novella *Family Tradition* from Sam's Dot Publishing.

John Jasper Owens ("Some Nutcase," page 40) lives in the South, and was not named after the painter, although thank you for your concern. He has published online at *Yankee Pot Roast* and *Flash Me Magazine*, and has work upcoming in *The Big Jewel*, *A Capella Zoo*, and the inaugural issue of *shortstoryofthemonth.com*.

Diane Payne ("Weather," page 96) teaches creative writing at the University of Arkansas-Monticello. She is the author of two novels, *Burning Tulips* and *A New Kind of Music*, and has been published in hundreds of literary magazines. Her website is <http://home.earthlink.net/~dianepayne/>.

Bret Tallman ("Compositions in Gratitude and Sorrow," page 27) lives in New York City. His other stories have appeared in *Hub*, *Down in the Cellar* and others, and will be appearing in *Aoife's Kiss* and *Black Ink Horror*.

Jean-Marc Velladier (cover art, "Knocking on Heaven's Door") is a French photographic artist whose work can be seen at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/87765855@N00/>.





WWW.ARKHAMTALES.COM